

## **From Policy to Practice: Examining the Effectiveness of the Elections Act 2017 on Women's Political Participation in Lower Dir**

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### **Abstract**

Women's political participation has long been a topic of discussion within global conversations on gender equality and democratic inclusion, as reflected in international frameworks such as CEDAW, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the Sustainable Development Goals. As a signatory to these commitments, Pakistan has implemented several policy measures to increase women's representation in its political institutions. This study critically examines the Elections Act 2017 as a policy tool intended to turn these commitments into action, focusing on its effectiveness in changing the gendered political landscape of Lower Dir, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, one of Pakistan's most traditionally patriarchal districts. Rooted in liberal democratic theory and feminist perspectives on political participation, this qualitative research employs an ethnographic approach to examine how legal reforms intersect with social and cultural barriers. Data were collected through primary and secondary sources, including field observations during the 2018 general elections and unstructured interviews with local respondents. The results show that cultural barriers, often seen as unchangeable obstacles to women's emancipation, have been strategically maintained by state and institutional actors to justify exclusionary practices. However, the analysis indicates that these barriers are not insurmountable; rather, they can be effectively addressed through strong, consistent, and context-specific implementation of progressive laws. The study concludes that while the Elections Act 2017 marks an important legislative step forward, its potential for transformation depends on active engagement by district electoral institutions, whose focus should shift from merely increasing numbers to ensuring meaningful, qualitative participation by women in politics.

**KeyWords:** Democracy, Political Participation, Gender, Gender Gap, Gender Political Dynamic, Women, Policy, Elections Act.

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## Introduction

In today's political debate, women's status in the political process is widely acknowledged as a critical component in creating a dynamic and inclusive democratic society. Recognizing the need to achieve gender parity in political representation, nations across the globe are working to ensure women's active participation in decision-making for the general welfare of society.<sup>1</sup> To ensure effective and full political participation the international community agreed on some important agendas, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, Peace and security (UNSCR 1325), the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's).<sup>2</sup>

CEDAW is referred to as the worldwide bill of rights for women. It was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979. Women's engagement in politics and public life is specifically addressed in Article 7 of CEDAW, which emphasizes the need to guarantee women's equal opportunities to represent their countries at all levels of government.<sup>3</sup> The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, is a seminal statement that delineates the strategic goals and measures to achieve gender equality across a range of domains, including women's participation in decision-making.<sup>4</sup> It demands more women in leadership roles and in political bodies. The UNSCR 1325 was adopted by the United Nations (UN) in its 4213<sup>th</sup> meeting, on December 31, 2000, and is considered a landmark resolution. The resolution has recognized the brutal impacts of the violent conflicts on women. The resolution urged member states to include women at all

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<sup>1</sup> Azeema Begum, "Political Participation of Female in Pakistan: Prospects and Challenges," *Unisia* 41, no. 1 (2023): 39-76, <https://doi.org/10.20885/unisia.Vol41.iss1.art3>

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC), *Women & Political Representation: Handbook on Increasing Women's Political Participation in Georgia* (Tbilisi: EMC, 2014), 1-30, <https://rm.coe.int/1680599092>.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations, *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, adopted December 18, 1979; in force September 3, 1981, United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, accessed September 17, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women>

<sup>4</sup> Tatiana DiLanzo et al., *Strengthen Girls' and Women's Political Participation and Decision-Making Power: Facts, Solutions, Case Studies, and Calls to Action* (policy brief, Women Deliver, November 2019), 1-10, [https://womendeliver.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/2019-8-D4G\\_Brief\\_Political.pdf](https://womendeliver.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/2019-8-D4G_Brief_Political.pdf)

levels of decision-making. The Member States were urged to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional, and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict.<sup>5</sup> The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were set by the UN in September 2000, to be achieved by 2015. There were 8 goals, and goal 3 was to promote gender equality and empower women. The major focus was on eliminating educational disparities.<sup>6</sup> Sustainable Development Goals, adopted in 2015, consist of 17 goals. Empowering all women and girls and attaining gender equality are the main objectives of Goal 5. In particular, Target 5.5 seeks to ensure women's equal access to leadership opportunities and their full and effective participation in political, economic, and public life at all decision-making levels. To improve women's political involvement and representation across a range of governance structures, countries often fulfil these international obligations through legislative measures, policy initiatives, and awareness campaigns.

While Pakistan has pledged to uphold these global agreements on the international stage, the country still faces significant challenges in ensuring effective political participation for women within its local context.<sup>7</sup> In the early years after independence in 1947, Pakistan had few legal measures to encourage women's participation in politics. Only in the following decades, as a result of a global movement for women's emancipation, did legal reforms start to address gender inequities. Equal political rights were established by the Pakistani Constitution of 1973, and further revisions attempted to close representational inequalities. In 2015, when the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted, Pakistan took an early lead in implementing them, with the Ministry of Planning, Development, and Reform introducing the SDGs as a development agenda centred on people's well-being.<sup>8</sup> The parliament officially recognized these goals as "national development goals" through a resolution. The Ministry of Planning initiated groundwork for implementing this crucial agenda,

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<sup>5</sup> United Nations Security Council, *Resolution 1325 (2000)*, S/RES/1325 (2000), 31 October 2000, accessed on 24 October, 2025 accessed it, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/{65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9}/WPS%20SRES1325%20.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> National Democratic Institute (NDI), "*The Millennium Development Goals: Handout 7*", pdf, accessed on 24 October, 2025, accessed it, <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Handout%207%20%20Millennium%20Development%20Goals.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Begum, "Political Participation of Female," 33.

<sup>8</sup> Government of Pakistan, Planning Commission of Pakistan, "Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)," accessed March 25, 2026, <https://www.pc.gov.pk/web/sdg>

working closely with provincial governments. Apart from other legislative measures, the Elections Act 2017 is of crucial importance. Despite Pakistan's international and local commitments, its ranking on the Global Gender Gap Index 2023 is 142 out of 146.<sup>9</sup>

In the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where historical circumstances and traditional conventions have frequently made it difficult for women to actively participate in politics.<sup>10</sup> The region's problem areas of militancy, rehabilitation, and a complex tribal system shaped women's mobility and political participation. These conditions led to specific legislative developments aimed at addressing various issues to create an environment conducive to female participation.

The case study of district Lower Dir, with its unique socio-cultural and political contexts, makes an especially strong case for the research. Unlike other adjacent districts, such as Swat, which has undergone remarkable political and social change over the last few decades, Lower Dir is known for its traditional social mores and tribal customs. This contradiction presents a singular opportunity to investigate the ways in which the Election Act has influenced local gender political dynamics, as well as the impacts of local traditions on the implementation and adaptation of the Election Act 2017.

The core of this research is the relationship between women's political engagement and legislation. The paper conducts a thorough analysis of how the Act affects women's political participation, concentrating on the Lower Dir district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). The paper addresses how the Election Act 2017 has impacted local gendered political dynamics in Lower Dir.

### **Conceptualizing the Term Political Participation**

A functional democracy must guarantee that its citizens have an active role in the decisions that impact their lives, which is why political engagement is so important. Participation is also listed among the key characteristics of a democratic citizen in a very famous book of political science.<sup>11</sup> According to the book, political participation is not just voting; it is more than that. Scholars hold different views on the term political

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<sup>9</sup> Amin Ahmed, "Pakistan Ranks 142 out of 146 Countries in WEF's Global Gender Gap Report," *Dawn*, June 21, 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1760949>

<sup>10</sup> Palwasha Nasir, "Barriers to Political Participation among Women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa," *Pakistan Review of Social Sciences (PRSS)* 6, no. 1 (2025): 36–49, <https://www.pakistanreview.com/index.php/PRSS/article/view/411>

<sup>11</sup> W. Phillips Shively, 2003, *Power and Choice: An Introduction to Political Science*, McGraw Hill, 8th edition, Boston.

participation; therefore, this research must first conceptualize it. Most traditional definitions focus on women's presence in parliament, which is merely symbolic participation in politics.<sup>12</sup>

Current prevailing approaches have limited political participation to behaviors that have the potential to influence others. According to Huntington and Nelson, political participation is the action taken by private individuals with the intention of influencing government decision-making.<sup>13</sup> Some scholars, such as Milbrath, define it as participation in political activity and support for the system.<sup>14</sup> According to him, reading about politics is also a form of political participation, although the mainstream definition excludes it because it does not directly affect other people. Verba et al. define political engagement as any activity that aims to influence government action, either directly through influencing the formulation or execution of public policy or indirectly through influencing the choice of those who formulate those policies.<sup>15</sup> The definition given by Verba et al. incorporates both normative and empirical understandings; it is fairly balanced. From the above definitions, it can be concluded that political participation is active participation in all available modes of political participation. This research considers balanced definitions, such as those of Verba et al., that integrate both the empirical and normative understandings of political participation.

## Methodology

This research is qualitative research, focusing on analyzing the impacts of the Elections Act 2017 in Lower Dir. The research has been designed as an ethnographic study. The data has been collected through both primary and secondary sources. As the study design is ethnographic, first-hand data were collected through an observational technique, with the researcher physically present and closely observing voting behavior, arrangements, community responses, and the exercise of the right to vote. To provide an overview of the women's participation in the previous elections in Lower Dir, data were collected from different websites, including the election commission, provincial assembly of KP, national assembly, and reports

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> "Political Participation: An Overview," *Science Direct*, accessed September 20, 2025, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/political-participation>

<sup>14</sup> Robert R. Alford and Roger Friedland, "Political Participation and Public Policy," *Annual Review of Sociology* 1 (1975): 429–79, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2946052>

<sup>15</sup> Carole Uhlaner, "Politics and Participation," University of California, International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences, 2015, DOI. 10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.93086-1

published by other institutions, such as the KP commission on the status of women, Free and Fair Election Network, media reports, and others. Moreover, the scholarly articles published in different journals, magazines, and newspapers were also utilized for this study.

### **Feminizing the Liberal Representative Democracy: Feminist Approaches and Perspectives**

Based on the ideas of individual liberty, the rule of law, equality, and inclusivity, the concept of liberal representative democracy is a pillar for political legitimacy and citizen empowerment in the dynamic field of democratic governance.<sup>16</sup> Liberal democracy aims to guarantee that the interests and voices of the people are represented in decision-making procedures.<sup>17</sup> Since it is the patriarchy that now characterizes the liberal democratic process, one of the major issues that has been facing liberalism in actual practice is that of equitable participation or genuine participation of gender views. Thus, the concept "Feminizing Liberal Representative Democracy" reflects the further analysis of gendered processes that constitute and shape representative democracy to bring actual democratic inclusiveness and justice.

It involves recognizing the core links between gender, strength, and representation, and striving to remove structural barriers to equal involvement and fair representation of all genders in political processes. The aim of promoting liberal representative democracy is to challenge deeply rooted patriarchal norms and create an enabling environment where varied voices can not only be heard but also have a better chance of determining the direction of governance. This encompasses objectives at the level of legislatures, electoral politics, and the making of public policy.

Many nations implement affirmative action measures to increase female representation in legislatures. This is typically achieved through voluntary or mandatory quotas, requiring political parties to nominate a certain percentage of women candidates for the seats they are contesting.<sup>18</sup> Quota systems are a widely recognized tactic to increase women's political participation worldwide. There are many types of quotas, for example, the parliamentary quota, which aims to guarantee that a predetermined

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<sup>16</sup> Andre Munro, "Liberal Democracy," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, September 4, 2025, accessed September 17, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/liberal-democracy>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Mala Htun, "Is Gender like Ethnicity? The Political Representation of Identity Groups," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol.2, No.3 (2004), pp.439–58 for a list of countries using gender quotas at national and local levels, and countries using reservations

proportion of seats in national, provincial, and local legislatures is set aside for women, thereby closing the gender gap in numbers. Another important quota is the party quotas, which are internal party regulations imposed either voluntarily or mandatorily to guarantee adequate representation of women among their candidates.<sup>19</sup>

However, experts examining decision-making in countries with more than 15% female representation in legislative bodies argue that the progressive feminization of legislative bodies does not automatically result in significant changes in political parties' policies and activities.<sup>20</sup> Advocates of the "numbers" perspective contend that it is too early to expect substantial effects on decision-making from women holding political positions. Even in almost every one of the sixteen nations in which, by 2004, women had achieved representation of 30 per cent or more in legislative seats, their time in government had been too short to produce noticeable outcomes.<sup>21</sup> This shows the importance of the number of women in the legislative bodies.

Conversely, after ensuring the visibility, transforming it into voices is equally important. This can be done through political and democratic apprenticeship. Moreover, the process of liberalisation and governance reforms has reduced the influence of traditional political institutions and facilitated the development of several new democratic arenas for governance.<sup>22</sup> This restructuring of the governance system has the potential to significantly affect the inclusion of historically marginalized political participants. In the past, the routes to enter politics were well-defined and predominantly limited to men, with women being generally

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<sup>19</sup> European Parliament, Directorate-General for Research, "Differential Impact of Electoral Systems on Female Political Representation: Working Paper W-10 — Women's Rights Series," Working Paper, European Parliament, March 1997, accessed September 17, 2025, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/workingpapers/femm/w10/4\\_en.htm](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/workingpapers/femm/w10/4_en.htm)

<sup>20</sup> Jane Jenson and Celia Valiente, "Comparing Two Movements for Gender Parity: France and Spain", in Lee Ann Banaszak, Karen Beckwith and Dieter Rucht (eds), *Women's Movements Facing the Reconfigured State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Mala Htun and Mark Jones, 'Engendering the Right to Participate in Decision-making: Electoral Quotas and Women's Leadership in Latin America', in Nikki Craske and Maxine Molyneux (eds), *Gender and the Politics of Rights and Democracy in Latin America* (London: Palgrave, 2002)

<sup>21</sup> Legislative Quotas for Women: A Global & South Asian Overview of Types and Numbers (Islamabad: Aurat Foundation, July 2012), 17-18, PDF, [https://www.af.org.pk/pub\\_files/1358744372.pdf](https://www.af.org.pk/pub_files/1358744372.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Diana Z. O'Brien and Johanna Rickne, "Gender Quotas and Women's Political Leadership," *American Political Science Review* 110, no. 1 (February 2016): 112–26, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055415000611>

excluded.<sup>23</sup> Emerging democratic spaces offer diverse platforms for education and networking that can foster new leadership and alternative pathways into the political arena.

The existing body of discourse regarding the "feminising" of democracy has primarily focused on the integration of women into formal political institutions and contemporary democratic frameworks. Nevertheless, a literal interpretation of the phrase "feminising democracy" implies a more comprehensive objective: instigating political reforms that genuinely promote inclusiveness, thereby democratizing democracy at its essence. According to Denise Walsh, gender differences in debate techniques and a lack of training in parliamentary culture prevent women from being fully included in the South African legislature.<sup>24</sup> Understanding women's political engagement requires a closer look at the 'new' democratic spaces and more 'traditional' arenas outside the realm of officially recognized politics in which women engage as social and political actors, as well as their pathways into politics, as opposed to the lion's share of attention that has been focused on representative democratic arenas. To engender a liberal representative democracy, there is a need for both quantitative and qualitative representation.

By adopting this conceptual framework of engendering liberal representative democracy, we are encouraged to analyze the Elections Act 2017 to examine its impacts on the local gender dynamics of politics in Lower Dir district of KP.

### **Policy Interventions and the Changing Nature of the Status of Women**

In Pashtun society, women were predominantly confined to their homes and primarily engaged in domestic chores. A Pashto proverb, An Analysis of Social Conditions *khazah ya da kur dah ya da gur* (a woman has to be in the home or in the grave), reflects the traditional view of women's roles within the household. The situation was similar in Dir, where women were perceived as one of the main causes of enmities. Despite this confinement, women were still respected in Dir society, and the practice of "*pardah*" (seclusion or covering) was obligatory for them. However, women from poor families often worked alongside men in the fields. If women needed to go outside of Dir, even with their husbands,

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<sup>23</sup> O'Brien and Rickne, "Gender Quotas and Women's Political Leadership," 115

<sup>24</sup> Denise Walsh, "The Liberal Moment: Women and Just Debate in South Africa 1994–1996," paper presented at the 2002 Midwest Political Science Association Conference, 2002, p.13 citing Shamim Meer, *Women Speak: Reflections on Our Struggles 1982–1997* (Kwela Books/Oxfam GB, 1998), p.163.

fathers, or brothers, they required special permission from the *tahsildar* (a local administrative officer) to ensure their safety and prevent their smuggling from Dir State.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, honour killings were not uncommon in Dir, where both men and women could be killed for suspected or confirmed illicit relations. The *Nawab* of Dir, Shah Jahan, appreciated those who carried out such killings and even encouraged the practice. If a man was accused of sexual harassment and subsequently killed, his murder was not to be avenged by his family. Widows had a challenging life, and if they chose to remarry, they were often limited to marrying within their deceased husband's family, such as his brother or a close relative.<sup>26</sup> Women had no right to inheritance, and any claims regarding inheritance were decided by a *jirga* (a traditional council of elders). Only the *nikah* (marriage) was conducted in accordance with Islamic law. Men could divorce their wives without providing a genuine reason, but it was mandatory to inform the *tahsildar* about the divorce.<sup>27</sup> In the context of marriage, the father of the bride would pay for his daughter's wedding expenses, and the amount was often announced publicly. Even the *Nawab* of Dir practised this tradition, as demonstrated during his daughter's marriage ceremony. However, when Shah Khisru Khan took over as the *Nawab* of Dir, some changes occurred. For example, if a woman was accused of having illicit relations, it had to be proved, and men could not kill women without proper witnesses. Besides these minor changes, the general condition and roles assigned to women did not change until about 1969. The society was unwilling to change the position of women, and women themselves often believed that their only job in life was to serve the family and the home. Additionally, the role of mullahs greatly contributed to keeping women secluded within Dir society.

### **Electoral Politics in Dir, 1970-2013: Continuities and Exclusions**

Electoral history in Dir, from 1970 to 2013, reveals a fascinating contradiction: a democracy characterised by an extraordinary non-participation, first as a single administrative unit and later as two separate

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<sup>25</sup> Alamgir Khan, "An Analysis of Social Conditions and Transformation in Dir State (1925-1966)," *Pakistan Historical Society*, 2024, 72(3). Retrieved from <https://phs.com.pk/index.php/phs/article/view/363>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

regions, namely Upper and Lower Dir.<sup>28</sup> Despite multiple efforts by Pakistan to establish an electoral democracy, interspersed with periods of military rule and significant reforms, women's political status in Dir has remained rather static. Strong support from both tribal authority and religious conservatism created the persistence of patriarchal norms, which ensured the complete exclusion of women from candidature as well as from the electoral process. Dir thus presents a stark case of gender exclusion within the electoral process. As such, Dir represents a stark example of gender exclusion in Pakistan's electoral politics, demonstrating how local structures of sociocultural understanding can thwart national changes in the region.

The elections of 1970 and 1980 are strong examples of this paradox. The general elections of 1970 marked the first serious democratic venture in Pakistan, introducing an unprecedented level of political competition nationwide. In Dir, there were no female candidates, and only a small number of female voters were allowed to vote. Male elders and Jirgas often maintained private agreements that denied women's

One would easily conclude that participation, which is largely symbolic, reflects and maintains patriarchal hegemony. Conditions did not change during the 1977 and 1985 elections, even though the politics shifted from party-based to non-party-based contests. Even the revival of multiparty contestations in 1988 and 1990, which contributed to democratic development in the rest of Pakistan, failed to break the stifling continuity in Dir: women were not fielded as candidates, and their voting was actively discouraged due to a mix of repressive policies and deep-rooted traditions.

This was particularly the case in the 1993 and 1997 elections. Women in other districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including Peshawar, Mardan, and Chitral, began voting more openly, but in Dir they were not allowed to do so. National and provincial parties — PPP, ANP, and PML-N — won seats from Dir, but none fielded female candidates. Because of intense lobbying, the attendance amongst women was very limited. Even a division of Dir into two districts in 1997, which, on paper, made it easier for women to get involved in politics, did not increase the number of women running for office. In contrast, Chitral saw not only large numbers of women voting but also elected female lawmakers, such as Nusrat Bhutto (NA-32, 1988) and, eventually, female candidates in the 2000s.

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<sup>28</sup> Qasim Ali and Kishwar Sultana, "Political Dimensions of Dir State in Historical Perspective," *International Journal of Pukhtunkhwa* 9, no. 1 (January–June 2024): 250–262, <https://pukhtunkhwajournal.org/journals/02-2024/issue-01/250-262.pdf>

The elections of 2002, 2008, and 2013 underscore the persistent exclusion of women in Dir, despite the implementation of national reforms. During General Pervez Musharraf's tenure, the allocation of reserved seats for women was increased at all levels of government, thereby enhancing opportunities for female politicians throughout Pakistan. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, women achieved greater visibility through reserved seats in the provincial assembly, with districts such as Swat and Peshawar experiencing a slight increase in female voter turnout. In Dir, these measures had minimal effect. In 2002, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) dominated the Dir constituencies.<sup>29</sup> However, women were excluded from candidature and voting, which reduced overall turnout to 24–33 per cent on average. In 2008, although the ANP and PPP-P were gaining strength at both the national and provincial levels, turnout in Dir remained low, ranging from 17 to 34 per cent, while informal male agreements consistently barred women from participating. During the 2013 elections, celebrated as the first-ever peaceful democratic transition in Pakistan, the distinctiveness of Dir was maintained: Jamaat-e-Islami maintained its dominance, no female candidates contested, and the Jirga-backed ban on women's voting continued.

DIR's electoral history from 1970 to 2013 reveals a continuity of exclusion that sets it apart in the conservative region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. At variance with other districts, Dir has been resistant to women entering politics through specific positions, symbolic contests, and voter turnout. In its local political culture, patriarchal dominance, together with tribal traditions and Islamic influence, neutralizes the constitutional assurance of national transformation and inclusion. Dir represents Pakistan's uneven democracy, in which formal democratic progress, the premiership of Benazir Bhutto, and the rise in reserved seats have failed to overcome the process of local exclusion.

### **The Introduction of the Elections Act 2017 and Women's Political Inclusion**

The Elections Act, 2017, was hailed as a milestone in electoral reforms in Pakistan, as it consolidated many existing election laws into a single enactment and made special provisions to encourage more women to participate in politics. The act requires political parties to allocate at least 5%

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<sup>29</sup> Election Commission of Pakistan, *General Elections 2013: Report, Vol. II (National and Provincial Assemblies Results)* (Islamabad: ECP, 2013), <https://ecp.gov.pk/storage/files/1/general-election-2013-vol-ii.pdf>

of their tickets to female candidates in general seats.<sup>30</sup> This resulted in a record 183 women candidates contesting in the 2018 general elections, making it a progressive step toward gender inclusivity in the country's electoral process. However, despite this progressive move, it is common for political parties to issue female candidates tickets in constituencies where they are unlikely to win, therefore defeating the purpose of the law. According to lawyers, this is a clear area where the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) must take steps to ensure proper implementation of these provisions to facilitate meaningful political mainstreaming of women.<sup>31</sup>

The Act also introduced a requirement for a minimum 10 per cent women's voter turnout per constituency. If that percentage is not reached, the ECP is empowered to invalidate the election in cases where women have been deliberately discouraged from voting. This makes the electoral process more transparent and protects the political rights of women by empowering the ECP to re-poll in the event of voter suppression. Before this Act, the ECP lacked the authority to nullify elections based on gender-discriminatory practices.<sup>32</sup>

Another critical aspect of the Act is Section 47, which mandates the ECP to take corrective measures if gender disparities exceed 10% in registered voters within a constituency.<sup>33</sup> This legal obligation seeks to bridge the persistent gap between male and female voter registration, reinforcing women's political agency.

### **Elections Act's 2017 impacts on women's participation in politics: An Analysis of the 2018 Elections**

Soon after the implementation of the Elections Act 2017, general elections were held in 2018. This portion has analysed the general elections of 2018 in the context of the Elections Act 2017, and how it has impacted the local gender political dynamics in Lower Dir. District Lower Dir was comprised of two constituencies, the NA-6 Lower Dir-I, and NA-7 Lower Dir-II.<sup>34</sup> In Constituency Lower Dir-I (NA-6), the total population

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<sup>30</sup> Elections Act, 2017 (Act No. XXXIII of 2017), sec. 206, Government of Pakistan. <https://www.ecp.gov.pk/storage/files/2/Elections%20Act%202017%20updated/Updated%20Elections%20Act%202017-231011-105435.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Dawn, "Ensuring Women's Political Participation," *Dawn News*, July 9, 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Peshawar High Court, *Election Commission of Pakistan v. KPK Assembly*, 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Government of Pakistan, The Elections Act, 2017, Section 47.

<sup>34</sup> Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN), *General Election Observation 2018: Result, Assessment and Analysis*, (Islamabad: FAFEN, 2018), 32, <https://fafen.org/fafen-general-election-observation-2018-result-assessment-and-analysis/>

is 721322, with a total of 351245 registered voters.<sup>35</sup> The voter turnout rate in the 2018 elections was 49%. The male registered voters were 205669, and the female registered voters were 154576, resulting in a huge gender gap of 60093. The number of female voters for every 100 male voters was 71.<sup>36</sup> The total voter turnout was 49%, of which 35% female and 58% were male. When it comes to the contestants, there were no female contestants for the national assembly from NA-6 Lower Dir-I.

In Lower Dir-II (NA-7), the total population is 714595, with 330592 registered voters.<sup>37</sup> The voter turnout rate in the 2018 elections was 46%. The male registered voters were 198085, and the female registered voters were 132507, showing a huge gender gap of 65587 more than NA-6. The number of female voters for every 100 male voters was 67.<sup>38</sup> The total voter turnout was 44%, with 31% female and 53% male. The total number of contestants from NA-7 was eight, and among them, only one was a female candidate, Sobia Shahid, a Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz candidate.<sup>39</sup> Among the eight contestants, she received 1256 votes and secured 6th place. The 2017 elections act has dramatically increased women's political participation as voters, as compared to 2013, when women were excluded from elections by men through the Jirga.

In the provincial assembly constituencies, Lower Dir comprised 5 constituencies: PK-13 Lower Dir-I, PK-14 Lower Dir-II, PK-15 Lower Dir-III, PK-16 Lower Dir-IV, and PK-17 Lower Dir-V.<sup>40</sup> From all the constituencies, there was only one female contestant from PK-15 Lower Dir III. The candidate was Sumera, a Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz candidate, who secured only 100 votes.<sup>41</sup>

Apart from statistical data, while sitting at the polling station, it was observed that males were receiving repeated calls from female polling stations, urging them to bring more women or they would lose the election.<sup>42</sup> So, there was a focus on the high turnout of women, but the question is: did the men really want to increase women's participation in politics? From the discussion and the researcher's observation, it was revealed that women were

<sup>35</sup> FAFEN, *General Election Observation 2018*, 32.

<sup>36</sup> FAFEN, *General Election Observation 2018*, 33.

<sup>37</sup> FAFEN, *General Election Observation 2018*, 34.

<sup>38</sup> FAFEN, *General Election Observation 2018*, 34.

<sup>39</sup> FAFEN, *General Election Observation 2018*, 35.

<sup>40</sup> Election Commission of Pakistan, General Elections 2018, <https://ecp.gov.pk/storage/files/1/Provincial%20KPK1.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> Election Commission of Pakistan, General Elections 2018, <https://ecp.gov.pk/storage/files/1/Provincial%20KPK1.pdf>

<sup>42</sup> Author's field notes, observation at Government High School, Takoro, polling station, NA-6/PK-16, July 25, 2018.

not permitted to vote freely.<sup>43</sup> They were allowed only when the male realised that their ballots were crucial to the victory. Then they used to arrange transport and escort them to the polling stations, but the women's participation remained reserved. This shows that their ballots were not their rights but were a strategic necessity for the victory.

## Findings

1. Throughout history, the cultural barriers that were and still are considered as the crucial barrier in emancipation were used as a cover by the state and institutions to justify the exclusion of women from politics. Still, this study finds that these cultural barriers can be overcome by taking effective and committed legislation and its implementation in its true spirit. As a result, local gender dynamics and political culture can change.
2. There is a significant increase in women's participation in politics, especially as voters, but they are still the victims of patriarchy, as they can't vote freely; hardly can one find a case where women have voted as per their choice, their choices are made by their male family members. When it comes to the reasons why they can't freely vote, this study finds that the women in the area are politically unaware, illiterate, and economically dependent on their male family members. To reduce the male influence on women while making their choices when vote, the government and the civil society must take some pragmatic initiatives to create political awareness in the women, to reduce their economic dependency on their male family members, however it's a slow process. Still, it is possible, and lastly the most important one is to give special attention to the female education. This is how the gender gap index in Pakistan can be reduced.
3. The study finds that the discontinuity of the democratic political process in the province has negatively affected women's participation in politics.
4. Furthermore, the study finds that the Elections Act 2017 altered the local gender political dimensions and ensured visibility but not the voices, as it was externally motivated participation, indicating that the role is still controlled and symbolic.

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<sup>43</sup> Author's field notes, observation at Government Primary School, Awari, polling station, NA-6/PK-16, July 25, 2018.

## **Recommendations**

1. This research recommends the strict implementation of the Elections Act 2017 in its true spirit.
2. The research recommends increasing the quota for women, both as voters and as party candidates. The minimum voter turnout for females must increase to 15%, and party candidates should increase to a minimum of 10% across the country.
3. Further, the research suggests that the district election commission's role is imperative; therefore, its focus should shift from mere quantitative representation to qualitative participation by women, and for this purpose, the district election commission should be more practical.

## **Conclusion**

Despite constitutional assurances and other legal guidelines, the local gender political dynamics remained the same, particularly in Lower Dir, and did not change the influence of patriarchal behaviour until the implementation of the Elections Act 2017. After the Elections Act 2017 came into force, the role of women in politics has notably increased across the province, especially as voters and contestants. Still, it falls far short of meaningful political inclusion. When it comes to Dir, the act affected locals' behaviour towards women in politics, and women actively participated in the 2018 general elections, where they had previously been totally excluded from voting, through verbal covenants and Jirga by male political elites. However, the perceptions remain the same, as the women did not vote freely; their choices to vote or not, and vote for whom, were still controlled by their male counterparts.

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