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EXPLORING THE FACTORS BEHIND WOMEN'S POLITICAL MARGINALIZATION IN BALOCHISTAN

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to explore the trend of women's political marginalization in the Balochistan province of Pakistan, as well as the complex interplay of various factors in maintaining this trend. This study employed a qualitative methodology, basing its theoretical perspectives on Nancy Fraser's two-pronged approach of misrecognition and misdistribution in explaining the concept of inequality in the political lives of women. In addition, this study was based on in-depth interviews with a diverse group of participants. The findings of this study revealed that the political participation of women in the region was affected by the patriarchal ideology, the patriarchal norms, tribal politics, tribalism, the movement of women, the dependency of women on men, and the misapplication and misinterpretation of religion. All these factors are interrelated and interlinked in such a way that they create a cycle, which has led to the political marginalization of women in the region. In addition, the patriarchal ideology has led to the political class capturing the seats that were reserved for women, and the women are left with the role without any power to make any decisions. All these findings have led to the creation of a new historical trend of women's political marginalization in the region.

Introduction

Balochistan, the largest province of Pakistan by geographical area, holds significant geo-strategic and socio-political importance within the country. However, this importance coexists with the complex social reality in which tribal systems and ethnic diversity are still dominant in the country. The deeply ingrained tribal systems and ethnic diversity are significant in determining the power structure and the way power is exercised in the country. The strategic importance of the area notwithstanding, the area continues to be characterized by structural inequalities in the country. The area continues to be characterized by the lack of women's access and participation in the political sphere. This is the essential backdrop in understanding the political marginalization of women in Balochistan.

The social reality in the area is dominated by the conservative nature of the people and the way in which the tribal systems and ethnic diversity are still dominant in the country. The women in the

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area are expected to remain confined within the walls of their homes and are not allowed to venture out into the public domain. This has resulted in the lack of participation and involvement of women in the political sphere in the country. The country has recognized the equality and participation of women in the political sphere through its constitution and the relevant policies and laws in the country. However, the implementation of the relevant policies and laws in the area is poor. This has resulted in the lack of a clear interface between the relevant policies and the actual situation in the country. It is therefore essential in understanding the political marginalization of women in the area (Baloch, 2021).

The participation of women in politics in Pakistan has traditionally been very low, but these conditions have been more pronounced in Balochistan, where women remain at a higher level of marginalization in politics. In Balochistan, women still face several issues in their everyday lives, including low educational opportunities for women, economic dependence on males in their families, restrictions on their movement, and deeply rooted gender roles in society. All these factors combined to make women's participation in politics seem socially unacceptable in Balochistan, where religious roles often seem to be used to support these conditions as well. The reduction in women's participation in national politics from 21 percent in 2013 to 19 percent in 2018 shows how these inequalities still prevail in Pakistan's political system. In Balochistan, inequality is not just economic or political; it is further complicated and entrenched in underdevelopment, low political literacy, and weak institutions. In understanding the marginalization of women in Balochistan politics, it is essential to consider how social, economic, cultural, and institutional factors intersect and interact with one another (Islam & Shah, 2023).

Literature Review

Women's exclusion from both social and political life in various parts of the world has become one of the most relevant issues in current studies. In Balochistan, this phenomenon becomes more acute due to the distinctive culture of the region. As scholars suggest, this is because the exclusion is a consequence of certain historical, cultural, and structural determinants of women's life in Balochistan, which marginalizes female citizens in both personal and political spheres (Khan, 2020). Hence, the underrepresentation of women in political processes can be considered because of historical exclusion rather than the unwillingness of women to participate actively in political processes. Thus, this literature review tries to reveal the causes of this problem and its implications for the region. Based on the existing literature, the underrepresentation of women in politics can be viewed because of interconnected determinants, which make women unable to participate in politics. In particular, the patriarchal character of families in the region, the strong influence of tribal traditions, the lack of institutional support, and unequal opportunities for education all contribute to this negative tendency (Khan and Hashami, 2021).

In this regard, the underrepresentation of women in political discourse cannot be attributed to any disinterest or incapability on their part. Through the combination of these diverse academic perspectives, there will be a thorough understanding of the reasons for women's marginal status in politics and their inability to become politically empowered in Balochistan (Zain & Isa, 2020).

In Balochistan, child marriage, universally recognized as a rights infringement on children, influences the lives of many young girls because of the intersection of entrenched cultural values with extreme socioeconomic deprivations. Child marriage brings about a sudden shift from learning and development into taking on household responsibilities, thereby altering the course of their lives. It has been found that once

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a girl becomes married, she is highly unlikely to continue her schooling due to the disruption caused by the psychological pressure, social scrutiny, and prevailing attitudes favoring their identity as wives rather than learners (UN, 2020). In terms of Nancy Fraser's model of social justice, early child marriage exemplifies misrecognition, whereby girls are not accorded with any social dignity, and they are considered dependent rather than independent beings.

Research Design and Methodological Approach

Qualitative research technique was adopted in this research with respect to data collection from my respondents for the determination of basic problems that led to the political marginalization of women in Balochistan.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was the chosen method for this research to explore deeply the causes of the political marginalization of women in Balochistan. With this non-probability sampling technique, the researcher was able to select the participants personally based on their knowledge, experience, and relation to the issue. The participants were a diverse group of individuals from different educations, socials, and political backgrounds such as female students, women academics, female media practitioners, women bureaucrats, and women politicians so that the sample would have a broad range of perspectives of gendered political exclusion.

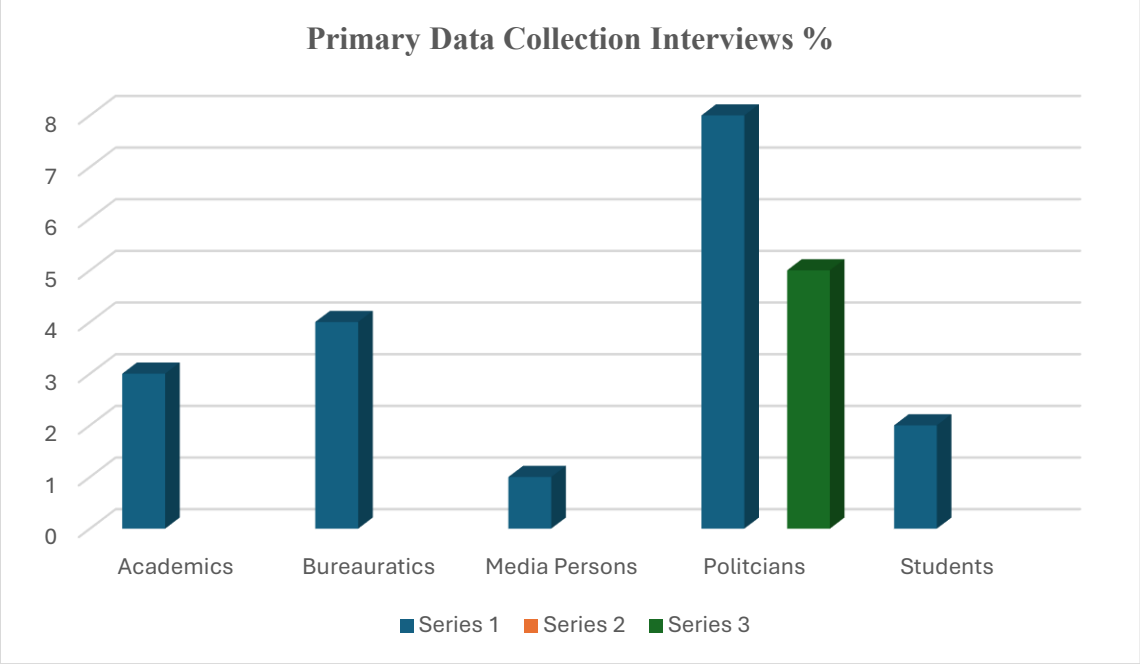


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Result and Discussion

Theme 1: Historical and Political linguistic Factors: Entrenching Patriarchal and Hereditary Power

This theme analyses the changes of the past to the present of the epicenter of power in Balochistan and the imprinted political culture of the region which has created a patriarchal pattern of political authority on a deep level that structurally serves to exclude women from holding power.

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1. The Enduring Legacy of the Sardari System on Modern Political Structures

Arguably, the most prominent historical obstacle is the Sardari (Chieftaincy) system legacy of which is still very powerful. The KIs pointed out repeatedly that the move to a formal democracy was more of a continuation than a break with the tradition whereby the modern political institutions were simply the new means to bring the old non-democratic tribal hierarchies to the fore. (Noreen & Musarrat, 2014).

A participant, male politician having a master's degree, explained the process of this smooth transfer of power in detail:

"The political system is based on inheritance from the past rather than on a democratic mandate. The core of power was, and mostly still is, the Jirga and the Sardari structure, which are patriarchal in nature. After elections were introduced, the traditional Sardars, Nawabs, and tribal elders merely took advantage of their already-established network of influence and resources their 'mal' and 'manpower' to get themselves elected to the provincial and national assemblies by the dint of their dominance. Women have never been a part of these traditional power-sharing mechanisms."

Moreover, the traditional aspect of male dominant society deprived the basic and societal paradigm of women in the social and political features regarding public. Furthermore, the social and normative values of public. In Balochistan, long-standing tribal traditions and historical governance have reinforced male authority. Women's opportunities for leadership are limited, hereditary power dominates, and their voices are often excluded from decision-making and public life, Output such article by (Abdullah, 2022).

A respondent, Chairperson Department of Political Science University of Balochistan, paved the way for understanding this phenomenon from the academic side by saying:

"The region's political science is very much aware of the continued close relationship between feudal tribes and the political system. Often, the state bargains with the tribal authority for administrative convenience, therefore, giving a new lease of life to the Sardar's control over the electoral block. This silent approval by the state guarantees the organized and intentional injustice in the distribution of political access as the basis of one's influence is their inherited, male lineage.."

The Sardari system is the reason why the culture has defined power as something that belongs only to men, and the system has been used as a means of distributing resources (wealth and networks controlled by men) structurally.

The political parties may play the role of gatekeepers whereby they have control over resources, nominations, and networking. As a result, this benefits more men since women will find themselves sidelined in the political process. Generated by (Amjad, 2024).

2. Political Party Structure as Institutional Gatekeepers and Mechanisms of shambolic distribution of resources and wealth

Among other things, the analysis showed that political parties that are supposed to be instruments of social mobility and integration often, in fact, operate as institutional gatekeepers that reflect and perpetuate the general patriarchal surroundings.

An interviewee, a well-known politician and M.B.B.S. graduate, while explaining the organogram of the party, said:

"*The central decision-making bodies the committees which are responsible for the allocation of party tickets and the distribution of campaign funds are, by and large, the domain of the influential male leaders, many of them with direct tribal connections. They use 'winnability' as the main criterion, which is, most of the time, just a way to indicate that the male candidate already has the financial and tribal support."*

Although some political parties in Balochistan offer women opportunities to engage in politics, many act as gatekeepers, controlling resources, candidacy, and networks. This male-dominated system marginalizes women, restricting their influence and meaningful, sustainable participation, Output such article by (Amjad, 2024 ; Anwar, 2024).

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A participant, women MPA, and social activists having an M.Phil., unequivocally singled out the line of causation that the effect had on the direct impact:

"The first leadership of your party cannot be the reason for you not to be able to run in an election if you are denied a ticket by them on the ground of a perception of 'lacking support.' This patriarchal institutional structure, which is of male control, is the one which many times ends the careers of women full of potential and that have not even gotten off the ground. In Balochistan, political parties often act as gatekeepers, controlling resources, candidacy, and support networks. This male-dominated system marginalizes women and highlights deeper social and political challenges, rooted in traditional value, that restrict their meaningful participation and influence, Output such article by (Kakar et al., 2023).

Theme 2: Socio-Cultural and Religious Constraints: The Pervasive Force of Misrecognition

The theme cuts down to the core of one of the main issues of cultural injustice (misrecognition) by showing the extent of ingrained patriarchal values in society, especially those related to gender roles and honor, which not only reject women's political participation but also, by abasing them on a social and moral level, constitute them a formidable environment of exclusion.

1. Socio-Cultural Policing: The Tyranny of Honors (Izzat, Purdah, and Mobility Restriction)

All the key informants (KI) referred to the cultural imposition of Purdah (seclusion) and the absolute preservation of family honor (Izzat) as the most widespread non-legal barriers that influence the political participation of women. The political domain is seen as something that goes against the core of these values which is why women getting involved in politics are subjected to a very strict and aggressive social policing. (Qadri, & Umer, 2015).

A participant, and male journalist with a lot of experience, explained the mechanism in a socio-political way in detail:

"When a woman goes into the public political space being at rallies, meeting male political workers, giving interviews she is breaking the fundamental codes of Izzat. Her action is not accepted as political participation but as a moral compromise. Society very quickly puts her under close surveillance, gossip, and character assassination, threatening the honor of her whole family."

The cause-effect is very much local and immediate, these consequences being a direct misdistribution of logistical opportunities.

This theme shows how deeply rooted socio-cultural and religious norms, especially ideas of izzat (honor), uphold patriarchal values and misrecognition, restricting women's freedom, agency, and meaningful participation in social and political life, output such articles by (Basheer et al., 2024 ; Ferdoos, 2025).

A female respondent, Ex-Member Balochistan Provisional Assembly, explained the restrictions on the campaigning:

"Seeing and being accessible are the main things in an election. A male candidate is free to work at any time, can meet the elders of the community in the Jirga, and can travel all over his constituency without any escort. A female candidate, controlled by these cultural norms, is limited. She can usually meet only women voters, sometimes a male family member is required for her as a chaperone, and she cannot access many important political gatherings."

Political parties often act as gatekeepers, controlling access to resources, candidacy, and support networks. This favors male-dominated circles, leaving women marginalized and struggling to gain meaningful influence and sustainable participation in politics, Output such article by (Amjad, 2024).

2. Selective Religious Interpretation as a Tool of Ideological Misrecognition

Interviewees brought up the deliberate use by patriarchal authorities of conservative readings of

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religious texts and customary laws. As a result, this operates as a carefully worked out ideological weapon to support the wrong perception by asserting that female political participation is not only a matter of social rejection but also of religion being against it. (Fraser, 1997).

This ideological misrecognition shows how cultural and religious narratives are often used to preserve male dominance. Challenging these selective interpretations is essential for enhancing women's freedom, visibility, and meaningful participation in society and politics, Output such article by (Anwar, 2024). (Ghafoor et al., 2023).

A lawyer respondent, Assistant District Attorney having an LLB, brought out the significant political effect of this indignation:

"If the morally or religiously problematized framing of a female politician's candidacy comes from the perspective of an influential character, then almost immediately her support base gets narrowed down. She ends up in a terribly contradictory situation of having to fight not only her political opponents but also the moral authorities of society. This discovery demonstrates the ways in which cultural instruments are strategically employed to sustain political dominance, Output such article by (Barrech & Din, 2022).

Theme 3: Socioeconomic and Economic Barriers: Enforcing Structural Resources deprivation

This theme explores the central issue of socioeconomic injustice by focusing on the unequal distribution of resources. It describes how women are systematically denied of their intellectual a and material resources, specifically financial and education independence, which are critical for meaningful participation in public life. Without access to these opportunities, women's choices and confidence are restricted, limiting their ability to act independently. Consequently, these overlapping disadvantages create enduring barriers that hinder women's efforts to attain political independence (Choudhry et al, 2019).

1. Educational Deprivation: Misdistribution of Cognitive and Civic Capital

The study emphasized that the extremely low levels of female literacy and educational attainment in Balochistan are the main reasons for the lack of political representation of women. This lack of education is a structural way of distribution that is hard to change, and it is the main reason why women do not have the opportunity to acquire political literacy, critical thinking, and civic awareness which are the basic requirements for making informed and independent political decisions.

An interviewee, a male CSP officer with a master's degree, highlighted the deep, long-lasting, and most importantly, the root-effect of the denial of the most basic of needs:

"Education is the main political resource without which a woman will not be able to know her rights set by the constitution, read the manifesto of a party or understand the candidate's promises in a critical way. She will be mentally dependent on the males of her family to lead her vote.."

The findings reveal systemic socioeconomic barriers such as limited education, financial dependence, and scarce opportunities to reinforce patriarchal control. These structural limitations deeply restrict women's freedom, agency, and active participation in social and political life, emphasizing the need for equitable policies and resource access, (Kakar, et al, 2023).

A respondent, Assistant Director with a Bachelor of Science degree, confirmed the connection between the level of education and political dependency:

"If women are illiterate and cannot understand the democratic process, the political elite can operate without any fear of scrutiny. In Balochistan, this educational shortcoming, which is significantly more severe for women than for men, is the main reason that the existing power structure keeps being reproduced. It is a purposely kept and strategically used inequality in the distribution of knowledge."

The findings show that unequal access to education and civic resources limits women's

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knowledge, skills, and engagement in society. This misdistribution of cognitive and civic capital strengthens patriarchal control and hinders their meaningful participation in social and political life (Manzoor, et al, 2025).

Financial dependency continues to intensify women's political marginalization in Balochistan. With conservative norms keeping many women tied to household responsibilities and men controlling most economic resources, women's choices and mobility become heavily limited. This imbalance affects their confidence and weakens their legitimacy in public spaces. Expanding women's economic opportunities and ensuring stronger institutional support are crucial steps toward enabling their independent and meaningful participation in political life (Choudhry et al, 2019).

Theme 4: Elite Structures and Institutional Capture: The Convergence of Injustices

This last, essential theme is about those top-level political mechanisms that the ruling elite use to keep their control. These architectures depict the complex network whereby the most blatant inequalities (control of resources) and the most subtle (symbolic role) interlock flawlessly, thus, by this co-optation, the dominating forces neutralize the emancipatory effects of their measures and turn them instead into instruments of exclusion.

1. Elite Capture and the Functional Failure of the Reserved Seat System

The KIs, referring to the system of reserved seats as an instrument of affirmative action introduced to politically redistributed access, have in unison voiced this system as the foremost institutional means to regularize tokenism and the continuation of the elite in control. The authority to appoint women to those seats lies with male-dominated party structures that have not been broken down into factions.

A respondent, Professor, and PhD, gave a solid, scholarly, and academic critique to the system's failure structurally:

"The reserved seats have been structurally captured. These seats are no longer a tool for the empowerment of the grassroots political leaders, rather they have become the private spoils of the political elite, who are systematically allocating these seats to the wives, sisters, or close relatives of male party leaders. The selection criteria are obedience without question, silence, and loyalty to the family, not political merit or the record of public service."

Reserved seats are often allocated to women with connections to influential families rather than those representing grassroots communities. Combined with conservative social norms, these obstacles erode women's confidence and sense of legitimacy. Meaningful change requires party reforms and stronger institutional support to enable women's active and independent participation in politics, Output such article by Bugti & Ali, 2023.

An interviewee, and woman politician having master's degree, brought to light a very significant issue through her brave testimony.

"She pointed to the essential absence of a public mandate as one of the main problems. She said that a reserved seat is most often referred to as a 'silent chair' for a reason. Although you are in the assembly, you do not have a mandate from the public; it is ab initio the male leadership of your party who gives it to you. Your role is to complete the quota, to increase the number, but you are certainly not allowed to bring your independent voice to sensitive issues that may, for example, jeopardize the interests of the family or the party leader who has put you there.

Understanding of the economic impediments that exist in electoral politics. She brought more power to my case for the introduction of institutional financial mechanisms. According to (NCS).

2. The Strategic Dynamic of Patriarchal Bargaining

In order to continue their political career, the female politicians must resort to a Patriarchal Bargaining of some kind. This means that as a tactical move they embrace a limited and

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conditional power and make a pact with their autonomy to gain the indispensable resources and the safety that comes from being in the co-opted male power structure. Such a complicated deal is one of the immediate results of the contradictory demands of misrecognition (social policing) and misdistribution (resource scarcity) that press all around equally. (United Nations, 2020).

3. Tribal power structures and political control in Balochistan.

The Sardari system, as a mechanism of social control where the tribal head single-handedly decides the vote of the entire clan, was established as a system-wide phenomenon in the village areas of Balochistan, thus the individual female vote was effectively made invisible and this can be considered a basic instance of political misrecognition at the lowest level.

A participant, a politician having an M.A., briefly explained the use of force as a method of control: *"In lots of places, voting is not considered as an individual democratic choice; rather, it is a collective responsibility towards the tribe or family tradition. The Sardars or the elders gives the instruction to the family unit and thus the whole voting bloc, which may consist of women as well, votes consequently. (Shah, 2018). The woman's ballot is just a rubber stamp for the decision made by males. Therefore, the democratic process is being used as an instrument to maintain the tribal hierarchy."*

In Balochistan, tribal power and patriarchal bargaining keep political control largely in the hands of elites. Male-dominated structures and reserved seats often benefit influential families, while conservative norms undermine women's confidence and legitimacy. Meaningful change requires party reforms and stronger institutional support to enable women's independent and active participation in politics (Ferdoos, 2025).

Recommendations

1. Strengthening Gender-Inclusive Political Institutions

Political parties are appreciative to come up with clear, merit-based criteria that focus on the selection of women candidates and the allocation of leadership positions that genuinely belong to them. Among the changes to the institutions there should be party committee gender quotas, continuous training programs, capacity-building workshops, and a system of financial support that enables women to function as independent actors within the party system. Along with organizational variations, political platforms should participate in nonstop preparation agendas and capability-construction workshops that reinforce women's management skills, political assurance, and plan proficiency. Correspondingly significant is the establishment of supportable economic provision instruments, which can decrease women's financial dependence and empower them to contribute as autonomous and important performers within the party system. Taken collected, these procedures can support modification of women's political appointments from inactive illustration toward sincere and essential leadership.

2. Reforming the Reserved Seat System

One way for the reserved seats to not be captured is that those seats must be filled by transparent nomination mechanisms or by a direct election at provincial and national levels. Candidates must be chosen because of community service, grassroots activism, and political competence. As a result, this will increase the access of talented women from the non-elite areas of the community. Highlighting excellence and community appointment would accessible politically aware for competent women from non-leading and demoted populations who are often ignored from formal influence constructions. Consequently, reserved chairs could progress from a representative prearrangement into a

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sincere and comprehensive pathway for women's political involvement and leadership.

3. Enhancing Education and Political Literacy

These three groups government institutions, universities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) need to work together to raise women's literacy, their awareness as citizens, and their understanding of politics. Education programs coming from the community and designed for women from the countryside should include the provision of rights, electoral processes, and leadership skills, thus empowering them to be able to take part in a democratic process in a self-sufficient way and without any supervision.

4. Addressing Economic Barriers

The use of microfinance schemes, skill development programs, and political funding support for women candidates should be the means through which economic empowerment is first accomplished. The creation of women-focused political grants and campaign funds will lessen the reliance on male patrons and enable women to go after leadership positions on their own. By attractive women's economic independence, these creativities can empower women to follow leaderships situations with remarkable self-confidence and to participate in the political field on more equivalent relationships.

5. Tackling Socio-Cultural Barriers

Awareness campaigns at the community level need to confront those cultural norms that are detrimental to the women and clear up the misunderstandings of the religion that limit women's roles in the public sphere. In this regard, local scholars, teachers, and mediators, through their interaction with the community, can immensely contribute to changing people's views and making it a common thing to see women getting involved in social and political activities. Within experienced education and conversation, these players can progressively support reshaping social thoughts and make women's contribution in political and social life a more acknowledged and in evidence part of normal community involvement.

6. Strengthening Local Government Participation

It is necessary to implement strategies that promote and support women in their decision of running for the local government elections which are the primary and most important way to reach political leadership. Women ought to be provided with training, be part of a mentorship network, and receive institutional support at the union council, district council, and municipal levels. Usually when mutual, these evaluates can encourage women's to engage actively in local governance and lay a strong foundation for advancing into higher political roles.

7. Ensuring Safe and Supportive Political Spaces

Politicians need to unveil hefty anti-harassment laws in their organizations, establish complaint mechanisms and legal protection systems if they really want to motivate the citizens to participate in a sustainable way. Safety at work is also important for the political world where women can be protected with monitoring committees, safe work areas, and transparent accountability structures.

8. Promoting Media and Civil Society Engagement

The changes wrought by women, the hardships they have faced, and their contributions to the political arena, are aspects that should be emphasized by the media and non-governmental organizations. These can be effectively utilized in changing people's views and consequently, requiring institutions to be gender-inclusive by creating awareness through documentaries, public debates, social media campaigns, and training workshops.

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Conclusion

The results reveal that culturally and politically, the state of Balochistan has long been preventing women from becoming fully involved in politics. The colonial period helped consolidate male dominance in society, and even after independence, political networks continued to be dominated by traditional hereditary power systems. The process prevented any female involvement, thus keeping women from acquiring knowledge and experience to become political leaders. Throughout generations, such practices have led to gender dominance in political organizations, leaving women deprived of chances to receive mentorship or participate in decision-making processes. Despite having education and talent, women fail to get their voices heard because they continue to be marginalized by deep-seated patriarchal traditions dominating political processes.

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