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GENDERED BARRIERS AND POLITICAL EXCLUSION: FEMALE STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN CAMPUS POLITICS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PESHAWAR

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Abstract
This research explores the barriers to female students' participation in student politics at the University of Peshawar. Through conversations with students, federation members, and faculty, the study brings forward how culture, family expectations, and daily campus practices shape women's place in political activities. The findings show that the problem is not a lack of interest from women, but a mix of honour, fear, institutional silence and the way politics on campus has been shaped almost entirely by men. Many young women feel that these political groups are not safe or serious spaces for them, and that their presence is often limited to being seen rather than being heard. Even then, some students continue to raise their voices in quieter ways, through study circles, volunteer work, and small acts of courage that challenge the limits placed on them. Their efforts show that political participation does not always begin with loud speeches, but sometimes with the simple act of refusing to disappear. The study highlights the need for stronger university policies, supportive faculty, and student bodies that genuinely include women, so that campuses can become places where female students can speak, lead, and imagine political futures without fear. "We cannot succeed when half of us are held back." ~ Malala Yousafzai

INTRODUCTION

"Women are teachers and guides. No nation can be worthy of its existence that cannot take its women along. There are two powers in the world: one is the sword, and the other is the pen. There is a third power stronger than both, that of the woman."
— Bacha Khan, speech at Islamia College for Women, Lahore, March 25, 1940

Student politics has long been a formative arena of political socialisation, dissent, and democratic imagination across South Asia. Historically, university campuses in Pakistan have served as sites of ideological contestation and civic awakening, shaping the course of national politics and social reform (Kokab, Waris & Iqbal, 2020). From the anti-Ayub protests of the 1960s (Feldman, 1967; Maniruzzaman, 1975) to the mobilisation of youth during successive political unrests, student movements have functioned as both microcosms and catalysts of broader

political transformation. The intellectual vibrancy and spatial symbolism of campuses, where assemblies, protests, and debates were once routine, produced a distinctive culture of political consciousness among young people who saw themselves as agents of change rather than passive observers.

Yet, this historical narrative of activism remains profoundly gendered. Despite women comprising nearly half of university populations, their participation in student politics across Pakistan remains limited and mostly invisible. The exclusion of women from these formative spaces of leadership reproduces patriarchal structures that continue to define formal politics. Mushtaq (2022) criticises such exclusionary system to be inherently undemocratic and ineffective where half the population is systematically sidelined. Although the Constitution guarantees equal rights, social practices and institutional arrangements frequently deny women substantive participation. This gendered imbalance not only undermines democratic representation but also constrains the cultivation of inclusive political cultures within educational institutions (Mushtaq, 2022; Mpofu, 2017; Mupupuni et al., 2024).

In the province Khyber Pakhtunkhwa of Pakistan, this exclusion is further shaped by the cultural codes of *Pakhtunwali*, a moral system grounded in values such as *Pardah* (veiling), *Ghairat* (honour), and gendered segregation of space (Lindholm, 1982; Israr, Jan & Ali, 2024). These norms delineate public and private domains along gendered lines, which assigns political agency primarily to men while positioning women as custodians of familial honour and domesticity (Khalid, Khalid & Islam, 2023). Within university settings, these cultural expectations interact with institutional constraints, such as gender-segregated facilities, male-dominated student federations, and informal codes of respectability, to regulate how, when, and whether women can participate in student politics. Politics, in this context, is not merely an institutional domain but a gendered performance where women's visibility itself becomes a transgression (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Heldman, Carroll & Olson, 2005).

The University of Peshawar, known as the mother institute of the province and is the oldest and politically active institutions. This shows the tension between modern education and traditional social norms. Its campus hosts ideologically diverse federations such as the Progressive Students' Federation (PrSF), Muslim Students' Federation (MSF), Pakhtun Students' Federation (PSF), Islami Jamiat Tulaba (IJT), and Insaaf Students' Federation (ISF). While these groups represent a spectrum from secular to religious politics, their leadership structures remain overwhelmingly male. Women's participation, when it occurs, is often tokenistic, limited to cultural wings or auxiliary functions rather than substantive decision-making roles. According to Connell (2009), this exclusion reproduces a wider political culture in which women's voices are marginalised and their political capacities questioned.

Existing scholarship on women's political participation in Pakistan largely focuses on formal legislative grounds (Shaheed et al., 2009; Naz and Ahmad, 2012; Thomas, 1994), by leaving the formative domain of student politics understudied. The absence of attention to academic institutions is striking given that universities are spaces where political awareness, leadership skills, and civic habits are first cultivated. Understanding how cultural, institutional, and organisational structures intersect to shape women's political agency in these contexts is therefore crucial for explaining broader patterns of exclusion from formal politics.

Against this backdrop, this study examines the challenges faced by female students in participating in campus politics at the University of Peshawar, with a particular focus on how socio-cultural norms and institutional policies interact to constrain or enable their agency. It asks: How do gendered social values, such as those embedded in *Pakhtunwali*, and institutional arrangements within the university structure affect the visibility, participation, and leadership of female students in student federations? To

address this question, the study aims to highlight the mechanisms through which patriarchal values are reproduced within ostensibly modern academic settings and to explore the strategies women employ to negotiate and resist such constraints.

The study has three key objectives. First, it analyses how socio-cultural and institutional factors shape female participation in student politics within the University of Peshawar. Second, it examines how ideologically diverse federations that range from left-wing to religious, construct gendered norms of inclusion and exclusion. Third, it seeks to identify institutional and organisational measures that can promote equitable representation and leadership opportunities for women within student politics. Therefore, by situating women's political participation within the intersection of culture, institution, and ideology, this research contributes to ongoing debates on gender and political socialisation in South Asia. It reveals how everyday practices of exclusion within student organisations prefigure women's marginalisation in formal politics, and how female students' negotiations within these structures offer insight into emergent forms of resistance and redefinition of political agency. The broader significance of this study lies in its potential to reconceptualise student politics as not only a training ground for leadership but also a contested site of gendered power relations, where women continually assert their right to visibility, participation, and voice in shaping the political futures of their societies.

"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."
— *Simone de Beauvoir*

Literature Review

"*When women thrive, all of society benefits. Their education, income, and health have a direct impact on the future of their families and their communities.*" *Kofi Annan*

The marginalisation of women in Pashtun society cannot be understood without recognising the gendered social order in which identity, authority, and visibility are structured. The cultural code of *Pakhtunwali* shapes expectations of modesty (*purdah*), honour (*izzat*), and familial respectability, which in turn restrict women's presence in public spaces (Lindholm, 1982). Within this system, female visibility in politics is not only discouraged but often regarded as a moral transgression, because women's bodies and movement are tied to collective honour.

Rahim (2021), examining women's access to public spaces in Pashtun regions, argues that political participation begins with the ability to be physically present in social and institutional arenas. Her analysis demonstrates that the restriction of women's movement is not merely spatial but symbolic: it limits voice, agency, and the very imagination of public participation. As she notes, the norms surrounding *izzat* become instruments of discipline that regulate behaviour, speech, and aspiration, shaping women's understanding of themselves and their potential roles in society. Similarly, Azim (2021) illustrates how *Pakhtunwali*, religious orthodoxy, and state structures form a mutually reinforcing system of control. Even where formal legal rights exist, informal moral codes and selective law enforcement inhibit women from entering public or political life. This alignment of cultural, religious, and legal power produces what Azim calls a "triple bind," in which resistance to one domain often results in sanctions across the others. These dynamics make women's participation in politics not only difficult but fraught with social and familial consequences.

The exclusion of women from politics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is reproduced within universities, where cultural norms are absorbed into campus practices. Although student unions historically functioned as spaces for civic engagement and political socialisation (Hussain, 2012; Khan & Zaman, 2020), their internal functioning remains deeply gendered. The masculine norms of activism — assertiveness, public presence, late-night meetings, and public confrontation — implicitly position leadership as a male domain (Oxlund, 2008). Hus Khan (2024) shows how gender expectations within the University of Peshawar mirror wider social structures. Women are advised to speak softly, avoid visibility, and refrain from participation in spaces where male

dominance is assumed. These directives often come not only from peers but also from family and faculty, producing internalised caution, self-censorship, and withdrawal. The fear of reputational harm or being labelled "forward" discourages many female students from entering student politics at all. Even where institutional reforms exist, such as quota systems intended to enhance women's policy representation, they often result in symbolic rather than substantive empowerment. Khalid, Khalid, and Islam (2023) argue that women's presence in political bodies remains conditional, monitored, and often tokenistic. Leadership positions tend to remain controlled by men, while women are encouraged to adopt supportive or cultural roles rather than decision-making ones. The effect is a politics that welcomes women's labour, visibility, or symbolic presence, but not their authority.

Despite structural and cultural constraints, women negotiate spaces of political presence in subtle and creative ways. Khan (2018) highlights how Pashtun women articulate agency through poetry, storytelling, and artistic expression. These forms of expression, while not always publicly recognised as political, challenge normative boundaries by producing alternative archives of experience and dissent. This mode of resistance, what Khan terms acting "within the grammar of honour," allows women to speak without being silenced, refusing erasure even in constrained environments. Comparable dynamics appear in African contexts. Research from Zimbabwe shows that growth in female student enrollment has not been accompanied by leadership representation (Mupupuni et al., 2024). Student Representative Councils remain dominated by men, and women are relegated to supportive roles, reflecting the global pattern in which leadership itself is gendered. As Mukeredzi (2022) and Mpofu (2017) argue, inequality persists not because women are absent but because institutions are structured to keep them peripheral. These parallels emphasise that exclusion is not a cultural anomaly, but a systemic and transnational phenomenon embedded in educational, political, and social frameworks.

While extensive literature addresses women's place in public and political life, relatively few studies examine the university as a site where gendered political identities first form. Existing research acknowledges women as political subjects only once they enter formal arenas of politics (Shaheed et al., 2009; Naz and Ahmad, 2012), but rarely investigates how young women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa encounter, negotiate, or resist exclusion in campus political landscapes. The lived experiences of female students attempting to enter student federations remain understudied. This study addresses that gap by examining how socio-cultural norms, institutional practices, and organisational structures shape the possibilities and limits of women's participation in student politics at the University of Peshawar, and how female students creatively navigate and challenge these constraints.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design. Given the aim to explore how sociopolitical structures and cultural boundaries influence female students' participation in campus politics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a qualitative approach was most appropriate. It allowed us to access participants' lived experiences and interpret their meanings within their own cultural and institutional contexts. Our goal was not to quantify participation but to understand the emotions, constraints, and negotiations that shape it. Through this approach, we could listen to the stories behind women's silence and the motivations that sustain their political engagement.

We conducted the research at the University of Peshawar, one of the province's most prominent public universities with a diverse student population. As students at the university, we were already familiar with its academic and social environment, which helped us in building trust and gaining access to participants. The research population included female students, student federation representatives, and faculty members. We used purposive sampling to select individuals who could offer in-depth and relevant insights

based on their positions, experiences, and engagement with campus politics.

In total, we conducted twenty semi-structured interviews. Ten interviews were held with female students from various departments and social backgrounds. They represented three broad categories: those actively involved in politics, those interested but not directly engaged, and those who had deliberately distanced themselves from political activities. This diversity helped capture a wide spectrum of perspectives on participation and resistance. Five interviews were conducted with student federation representatives from major political groups, including the Progressive Students Federation (PrSF), Pashtun Students Federation (PSF), Islami Jamiat Tulaba (IJT), Muslim Students Federation (MSF), and Insaaf Student Federation (ISF). Their views provided a window into how ideology, organizational structure, and gender norms shape women's inclusion, or exclusion, within student politics. The remaining five participants were faculty members from the Departments of International Relations, Political Science, Philosophy, and Gender Studies. Some also held administrative responsibilities and thus offered valuable insights into university policies and institutional attitudes toward student federations and female political participation.

Data were analysed through thematic analysis. We first read each transcript closely to identify recurring words, emotional tones, and shared experiences. Then we grouped these into emerging patterns and developed broader categories such as ideological resistance, fear of defamation, family pressure, policy vacuum, and crisis of trust. This process made it possible to interpret how different social spheres; home, campus, community, and political ideology; interact to shape women's political experiences.

As with any qualitative study, this research has certain limitations. It focuses on a single institution, the University of Peshawar, which limits the generalizability of its findings to other universities or colleges in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The sample size, though diverse, was small and may not represent all possible perspectives of female students. Time constraints also prevented the inclusion of university administrators and non-student political actors, whose views could have added further depth. Additionally, because many discussions touched on sensitive or personal issues, some participants, especially federation members, may have moderated their responses due to social desirability concerns.

Throughout the research process, we followed established ethical guidelines (Bell & Bryman, 2007). Each participant was fully informed about the purpose and scope of the study, assured of confidentiality, and participated voluntarily. Informed consent was obtained before every interview, and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

Analysis

"The personal is political." Carol Hanisch, 1969

Following the thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006), a six-step framework, we analysed the collected interviews thematically to understand political participation of females within student federations at the University of Peshawar. We identified five interlinked themes from the data which were: crisis of trust and representation; political irrelevance and silent activism; ghairat, pardah, and institutional control; male dominance and gendered spaces; and reforms and emerging alternatives. Each theme reflected on how women navigate the political, cultural, and institutional boundaries that defines the dynamics of student politics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

1 Crisis of Trust and Representation

During the interview process, the most common sentiment among the female participants was a substantial distrust in the purpose and legitimacy of student federations. It highlights that this disengagement is not rooted in apathy or lack of awareness. Rather, it stems from a perceived lack of legitimacy. A former member of PrSF shared, "*I don't engage with student federations because those who are involved are not implementing any ideology. They join just for fun or fame.*" (Anonymous, Personal Communication, 2025). Majority of them believed that these organizations reproduce

the same gender hierarchies and patronage politics which dominate Pakistan's national political sphere. A student from law department expressed this disillusionment bluntly, "*I joined thinking we would raise women's issues, but the meetings always turned into power games among male members. They call it politics, but it is more about control*". (Abida Tabassum, Personal Communication, July 24, 2025).

For most women federation membership offers symbolic inclusion rather than genuine participation. She goes further by saying; "*we were invited to represent female side, yet very rarely involved in actual decision-making.* It implies that federations seem to exist just to show off or gain popularity. Their "inclusion" often stops at visibility. Females just being invited, photographed or cited as a proof of progress, without having any real voice in shaping policy or decision. This confirms what Ahmad and Mariyah (2025) observed in their research, where women are seen but not heard in local politics, especially within PTI's local structures, which often operates as a mechanism of legitimacy rather than empowerment. One of the faculty's respondents also recognised this erosion of trust. A professor at the department of Political Science stated that "*student politics today mirrors national politics, which is loud, masculine, and exclusionary. It's hard for female students to see themselves in that.*" (Anonymous, Personal Communication, July 24, 2025). This observation brings forward an important feminist critique that the structure of politics itself has been shaped around masculine ideals of authority, aggression and visibility. Within such a culture, women's political engagement is generally seen as an exception rather than a norm.

This "crisis of representation" refers to the loss of credibility of institutional politics in the eyes of female students. For many of them, federations have come to represent male self-promotion and not collective well-being. As one Political Science student summarised it, "they only remember us when it is election season", which shows that a symbolic democracy exists, open in theory but closed in practice. (Noor Afza, Online Chat, July 2025). From a feminist point of view, this crisis reflects exclusion on the one hand and, on the other, a loss of faith in student politics as a whole. When the representation is empty, the result is disengagement, but this disengagement can also be interpreted as a silent kind of resistance, not wanting to allow themselves to be part of spaces that use their presence without respecting their voices.

2 Political Irrelevance and Silent Activism

Opinions on the political role of federations were polarised. While some respondents felt that federations can empower students and make them more aware of their rights, others felt that they were politically irrelevant. Political participation for a significant number of female students is not absent but transformed into less visible and socially acceptable forms of activism. Several participants discussed how they preferred to join departmental societies, NGOs or volunteer groups rather than formal federations. An interviewee from the department of International Relations stated that "*I do go to sessions organised by NGOs such as Aurat Foundation or Khwendo Kor because they discuss rights in a manner which is safe for me. Federations are discussing ideology, not our lives, as if politics does not have an impact on women at all.*" (Eman Chaudhry, Personal Communication, July 2025). This selective engagement is closely connected with Bilal and Ahmad's (2021) argument that women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa often tend to build "feminine social capital." It is a form of political engagement which is based on community action, education and social awareness rather than direct confrontation. A similar sentiment was shared by another female from the Statistics department: *"I've stopped going to federation meetings, and they never talk about things that directly affect us, for example, safety, harassment or facilities. Political parties are the only people they speak of."* (Ehsan Irtiza, Personal Communication, July 26, 2025).

Such reactions seem to indicate a quiet yet determined form of silent activism. Women resist political exclusion not by withdrawal, but by rechannelling their energies into informal or issue-based activism. This change was confirmed

by one of the faculty members of the Political Science department, who said that *"female students are more active in volunteer and academic initiatives than political ones. It is their way of staying being involved without being targeted."* (Personal Communication, July 24, 2025). This claim is resonated by Farid's (2022) research on women parliamentarians in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Women empowerment is not always visible in formal metrics but often emerges through what he calls "micro-political negotiations within constrained spaces." Therefore, while female students may appear politically inactive, their activism is reformulated through subtler community engagement that challenges the status quo in its own way.

However, data from some students and federation members contradicts this notion of irrelevance. A student from Journalism and Mass Communication department shared her experience, *"When I was at the university, the fee was increased, and it was these federations that protested to the VC. The decision was taken back."* It indicates that federations continue to exert mobilising power when the issues concern the wider student body. The Chairman of Insaf Student Federation in an interview said that although there have been legal bans, and visible political activity has been subdued, informal activism still lasts. "*We work in silence now. We deal with issues of harassment, raise quality concerns, and challenge discrimination; but we do it discreetly,*" he said. Although, the fact that such efforts are invisible to the student body means they are poorly communicated, which contributes more to the perceptions of irrelevance.

3 Ghairat, Pardah, and Institutional Control

The intersection of cultural codes and institutional structures creates what is perhaps the most persistent wall around women's political lives. Several female students described the fact that their families did not allow them to participate out of the fear that "something bad" would happen. Not only that, women's visibility and participation have been constantly governed by ideas like ghairat (honour) and pardah (seclusion), which defines what is socially permissible. These are not just values, they are tools, determining when and where a woman can be seen. Female participants often told their personal stories when asked why and how their political involvement was questioned or stigmatised. Maleeha Rehman from Political Science department added: "*when I went to a federation event then my cousin said, this is not for girls because it ruins their image. Even sitting in mixed group becomes an issue of honour.*" Her words hang very heavy, honour, image and silence are so woven together that even curiosity is defiant.

This is what Shah (2020) describes as the "Pashtun moral order", where the public appearance of women is frequently seen as a matter of national and communal respect. When women dare to step outside the limits imposed by their families, they are exposed to shame, blame and sometimes even violence. Within university the same moral order finds institutional expression, in the form of these values translated into restrictions, which often are justified under the pretext of security. A professor from Gender Studies department explained that "*female students are usually discouraged from attending late meetings or sessions, not officially, but socially and it is the university's way of maintaining discipline.*"

The consequence is what one girl called 'protection that feels like punishment'. The walls (unwritten rules) are invisible, yet they decide everything from movement and time to permission. Even well-meaning teachers and administrators often replicate these cultural norms to confine women to private academic sphere and keep the political domain masculine. Hence, ghairat and pardah operate as invisible walls, by maintaining the illusion of equality while structurally denying it. This tension is also observed by Ahmad and Mariyah (2025) that how cultural morality in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa often overshadows constitutional rights and how women's visibility remains negotiated and fragile, rendering their participation conditional. Here too, the pattern repeats that access is offered in theory but denied in practice. Which is best described as "an open campus yet closed in spirit."

4 Male Dominance and Gendered Spaces

The normalisation of male authority within student federations appeared as the most recurring pattern during interviews. It was also observed that the subtle gender hierarchies are embedded in university spaces. Most of the females described student politics as a "male terrain", a place where women's presence is tolerated not valued. A student from law department put it this way, "*They invite us to meetings but interrupt us when we start speaking. It feels like we are there just to prove they are inclusive.*" (Maham, Personal Communication, July 29, 2025). Her statement depicts the symbolic inclusion that defines many federations. Women are visible enough to project equality but not heard in the actual decision-making. This is what Ahmad and Mariyah (2025) term as gendered political citizenship in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Here participation exists without actual power. Unfortunately, this behaviour is not just individual but institutional, manifesting in how meetings are scheduled and organised, who speaks, who drafts resolutions, and who is expected to "just attend". It is performative inclusion which is strategically displayed without being internalised.

This pattern is unintentionally affirmed by federation representatives themselves. A cabinet member of IJT, a religiously oriented federation, remarked, "*we do have female members, but they are not regular. Sometimes families do not allow them to attend meetings.*" (Anonymous, Online Communication, June 2025). Though his tone reflected empathy, he implicitly shifted accountability from the federation's own structure to the families, overlooking how these very federations reproduce restrictive gender norms by failing to challenge them. Bilal and Ahmad (2021) rightly argue that feminine social capital in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa remains entrapped in patriarchal boundaries, and it is only accepted when it reinforces existing hierarchies, not when questions them.

The university environment itself amplifies this divide. Faculty members frequently shared the similar view of how male students dominate both discussion and space. A professor from philosophy department said, "*male students dominate through confidence and numbers, and even capable women stay quiet because the environment feels masculine.*" (Faculty respondent, Online Communication, July 2025.) Here an important point arises, that masculinity is not merely biological but spatial; embedded in voice, posture, and control over communal areas. Offices of federations, their gathering spots and even informal cafes on campus operate as male-coded zones, where women's entry is either exceptional or temporary.

However, this exclusion is not always prominent. Sometimes it hides behind gestures of protection, "*we don't want them to face issues,*" "*It is not safe for girls to stay out after 4pm*", this is what Farid (2022) calls the 'protective patriarchy' of Pashtun spaces. Such narratives present restrictions as care, though the effect remains the same. In this sense, Shah (2020) says that Pashtun social structures see women's visibility as a moral risk rather than a political right. The continuation of this idea in university politics is an indicator of how thoroughly patriarchal thinking pervades even the spaces of the so-called progressives. Despite the ideological diversity of student federations, religious, nationalist, or progressive, they mainly reflect the same gender hierarchy. The left preaches equality but often practises hierarchy and the right uses morality as an exclusionary value.

Surprisingly, the change is not completely absent, though slow. For example, the Progressive Student Federation has had a female president recently, a milestone in an environment resistant to change. And while these numbers are minimum, they reflect a steady but ongoing shift in gender politics on campus. As argued by Farid (2022) and Shah (2020), empowerment in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is often a process of resistance and action against all odds. And this is how a minimal presence is a radical act of redefinition.

5 Reforms, Resistance, and Emerging Alternatives

There is a quiet but consistent resistance amongst all this resistance which does not often manifest

in loud protests; but rather in thoughtful reimagining of what participation might look like. In the interviews, females, faculty and federation members alike referred to reforms as something that needs to begin on the inside; inside federations, inside the university and inside the culture itself. One of the female participants from the Psychology department put it beautifully, "*we don't need permission to lead, we just need space and support, and getting to work with NGO's like Aurat Foundation provides us with that courage*" (Muniba Orakzai, Online Communication, May 2025). There is both frustration and hope in her statement. It is not a validation from male-dominated structures that is needed but platforms for building confidence and political consciousness in females. NGO's like Aurat Foundation, Blue Veins, Mehergarh Learning Center and Da Khwendo Kor, were repeatedly referred to as allies in this process. They were emphasised not only as external agents, but as places where women could learn the language of leadership and advocacy. These partnerships serve as bridges between formal politics and social activism, which educate the young girls that resistance can be organized, informed and community based.

Several members of the federations also intimated a change, some with a tentative hand and others in a determined way. The President of MSF told, *"we are preparing to establish all-girls' cabinets in various departments of the university, which will not only be symbolic but headed by women themselves."* (President, Muslim Student Federation, Online Communication, June 2025). The fact that the phrase "not just symbolic" itself is a reflection of an emerging realisation that tokenism is not sufficient. It suggests an internal critique of their own organisation and a recognition that reform cannot be performative. Faculty members, though observing from distance, emphasised that institutional recognition remains crucial. A professor argued, *"If the university formally recognises federations with clear gender guidelines, it could legitimise women's involvement and remove fear."* (Faculty respondent, Personal Communication, May 2025). Fear here is not abstract, instead it is the everyday fear of being labelled "rebellious", of jeopardising reputation, or of violating unspoken cultural codes, therefore, institutional backing could offer legitimacy to female participation.

This mirrors what Bilal and Ahmad (2021) describe as "transformation from within", where empowerment is not imported but cultivated through local practices and contextual understanding. In the same way, Farid (2022) observed that women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa often redefine empowerment through collective solidarity rather than individual success. For many of these students, joining hands with one another, even in informal support groups, small study circles, or NGO's workshops, is itself a radical act of reform. Reform here is definitely not an event, it is a slow cultural negotiation. These women are not waiting for the structures to change, instead they are learning to exist and act within them in a different way. One could sense this spirit of gradual transformation propagating through the narratives like, *"we may not be in the front row yet,"* as a participant took the positive stance in an optimistic and heightened voice of, *"but we are not silent anymore."* (Abida Tabassum, Personal Communication, July 2025). Their resistance takes many forms, from questioning, showing up, forming alliances and mentoring others, which changes the understanding of what "political participation" means in the context of the University of Peshawar.

What emerges, then, is a new imagination of politics, the one rooted in collaboration, care, and community rather than hierarchy. As these women move forward, they carry the possibility of turning federations from male-centric institutions into truly participatory spaces. This, consequently, forms a vision of political culture that mirrors the slow but certain evolution of Pashtun society itself.

"All women are Sughar (skilled and confident). They just need opportunities to unleash that potential within them." ~ Khalida Brohi

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The study of the political participation of women in student federations at the University of

Peshawar presents a complex reality, the one, which is marked by resistance and restraint. It becomes clearer that participation for most of the female students is not just a political act but a constant negotiation with the culture, family, and the institutional power. Factors such as ghairat, pardah, political irrelevance and male dominance continuously keep determining the boundaries of what is acceptable for women. However, under these same constraints, young women are subtly redefining the meanings of political participation by showing up, mobilising and speaking, even if remained unheard. Their existence defies the unspoken codes that made them silent before.

At the same time, the research demonstrates a crisis of representation, where even federations which seem progressive perpetuate patriarchal hierarchies. The liberals enchant equality but practises hierarchy, giving women symbolic positions instead of real power. This rhetoric-reality gap has resulted in many female students doubting whether these spaces are actually theirs. However, it is just this disillusionment that is producing new forms of agency such as informal sisterhood, independent student gatherings and participation with different NGO's. These collaborations provide a way of claiming space without having to ask for permission.

The policy recommendations that emerge from this study call for institutional reform as well as the need for cultural re-orientation. The universities should set up gender inclusive guidelines for the federations with representation of women in decision making positions. Partnership with local NGO's and women-led organisations should be formalised, in order to build leadership and advocacy skills among female students. Furthermore, Universities and student bodies must create safe political spaces, through mentorship programmes, awareness workshops and gender sensitivity trainings. This will help to break down stereotypes from the inside. To summarise the findings in few words, we would suggest that "empowering women in politics is not about only opening doors but also changing the rooms themselves".

Begum Naseem Wali Khan once said, *"The chains that hold women back are not unbreakable, they just need the courage of one strong woman to begin the cracking."* The young women of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are that beginning, who are challenging old hierarchies not through confrontation, but through quiet, persistent reform.

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