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**THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL NORMS ON WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN SWAT: A  
FEMINIST STUDY**

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**Abstract**

Women's leadership is one of the major concerns of the current time in Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). A significant number of studies have been conducted regarding women and challenges faced by women in Swat but lesser focus is given to the impact of cultural norms on women's leadership, which needs to be addressed thoroughly. This study aims to explore the impact of cultural norms on women's leadership in Swat KPK. The study is qualitative in nature and carried out with a feminist lens. Moreover, the data were collected from four different women leaders in Swat. After the thematic analysis of the data, the study shows that women are under the influence of cultural norms that are socially constructed in Swat. Furthermore, in some cases, those norms are advantageous but at the same time also create hurdles for women to reach a high position as women leaders.

**Keywords:** Women Leadership, Cultural Norms, Swat KPK, Social Values, Pakhtunkhwa

## INTRODUCTION

In different cultures, women's leadership have been influenced by several factors. It has been a widely discussed debate for years. Social norms and cultural values are shaping the aspects of human life so they cannot be overstated (Agha, 2003). Swat, which is known as the Switzerland of Asia, observes gender roles that are embedded in its cultural norms and values. Moreover, some predefined cultural norms and values assign roles to respective genders, and opportunities and responsibilities are hence given based on the traditional gender roles. Having its rich cultural legacy created by local customs and historical influences, Swat, a scenic province of Pakistan, is well situated. Comprehending the cultural context is essential for interpreting the complex interactions between women's leadership ambitions and cultural norms.

In Swat KPK, gender inequality is still a major problem since it is reflected in differences in social engagement, work, and education (Shaheen, 2021). It is essential to examine how gender inequality manifests in the area to situate conversations about women in leadership roles within a larger sociocultural framework. The high dominance of males in Swat shapes and determines the dynamics of power (Amjad, 2022). Resulting from this is the formation of a patriarchal structure where high places are accorded to men as compared to women. This, therefore, opens access to dominant roles, decisions, and resource allocation to men.

Worse still, cultural entrenchment of male domination is deep and shapes both institutional structure and social interaction. This forms in the several spheres of life, like work, education, and political engagement. Considering how this may affect the equation, one will have to consider what surrounds the emergence of the ambitions of women leadership.

A complex set of cultural traditions has constructed a multi-pronged set of challenges against which the females of Swat, who would be leaders, have to struggle. Such stereotype challenges, resistance to change, limited possibilities within the field of education, and expectations from society are just but a few. Knowing and analyzing these barriers is important for creating strategies to overcome and cross them.

The women's leadership status in KPK, Swat, has ample scope to increase despite the challenges. The need is to recognize these opportunities and work on them to make the society inclusive and equitable. Cultural environmental bright sides may be explored to bring clarity on some potential avenues for the woman's emergence as a leader. It is no exaggeration to say that women now constitute half of the available human capital in any competitive economy. Gender parity is something that cannot be washed out in such a scenario since, in the challenging economy of today, every resource available needs to be utilized, and women form a substantial workforce (Tran et al., 2001).

Furthermore, inequality affects women in terms of their access to financial resources, education, and business prospects. Even though more and more women are pursuing higher education, there is no assurance that these women will eventually join the mainstream because the majority of them marry young and are prohibited from entering professional life, which widens the gap in leadership, education and employment. It is clear now that women in Swat have the necessary education and abilities, the real barriers are the societal ones veiled.

This study explores with feminist lens the impact of cultural norms on women's leadership in Swat that are deeply rooted in society and influence women's leadership roles. Further, this study considers the societal and cultural conditions that impact the evolution of women as a leader in Swat. In most of the

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dominating fields' women's role as leaders is quite gloomy. They do have education and skills for the role of leader but are restricted. Moreover, the piece of work by Beauvoir offers a masterful analysis of women's circumstances, including the social, cultural, historical, and economic factors that shape their existence. "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential," the author writes in her work *The Second Sex*. She is the Other being; he is the Subject and the Absolute (De Beauvoir, 2016).

### **Research Objectives**

Exploring the impact of cultural norms on women's access to leadership positions in Swat, identifying facilitating and hindering factors.

### **Research Questions**

This study addresses the following research questions:

What is the impact of cultural norms facilitate or hinder women's access to leadership positions in Swat?

### **Significance**

By providing insights into the particular cultural barriers experienced by women in Swat, Pakistan, this research adds to the body of knowledge already available on women's leadership. Policymakers, community leaders, and academics who are interested in advancing gender equality and encouraging women's leadership in a variety of cultural contexts will find the findings to be beneficial. Through clarifying how cultural norms affect women's leadership, this study aims to guide interventions and tactics that enable women to break through cultural obstacles, take on leadership roles in Swat, and maybe function as a model for comparable situations throughout the world.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The cultural norms and societal values that are prevalent in different cultural contexts, like Swat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan, have a significant impact on women's leadership. For women to be empowered and for gender equality to prevail in leadership roles, it is imperative to comprehend the complex interactions that exist between cultural forces and women's leadership. This review of the literature compiles findings from a significant number of researches that investigate how cultural norms affect women's leadership and what effects such norms have on women in Swat. Though there is no one set definition for leadership, Schwartz, Michener and DeLamater (1990) described it as a process in which individual members' behaviour and influences are controlled to achieve a desired outcome in a group setting. Moreover, the one who has the greatest influence inside a group is considered the leader (De Nmark, 1993). Furthermore, women's leadership demonstrates their ability to take the lead in a group setting.

The presence of women in leadership roles is greatly impacted by the strictness of cultural standards, according to a worldwide viewpoint (Toh & Leonardelli, 2012). Tight cultures, which are defined by rigid social norms and social penalties, are more likely to oppose shifts that go against established gender roles, which can hinder the rise of women in leadership positions. On the other side, loose cultures are more open to changing current behaviours, claim Toh and Leonardelli (2012).

According to Norris & Inglehart (2004), role expectations—which prioritize family obligations over professional growth—are a major barrier that prevents women in Pashtun culture from obtaining leadership positions. This demonstrates the psychological effects of cultural norms on the decisions and professional paths

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made by women (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). Moreover, looking at how religion impacts the leadership of women in Dir Lower, KPK, this paper thinks of ways to raise political awareness, educate women, and draw upon the role of the government and non-governmental organizations in strengthening women leaders (Khattak et al., 2020). The study highlights the potential of female leaders in addressing community issues.

Furthermore, a study conducted in Pakistan (2012) at institutions exclusively for women shows how culture and belief systems have affected women's roles as educational leaders (Shah & Shah, 2012). The article concludes by pointing out how imperative it is to expose discursive processes at play in the social environment to understand the nature of the obstacles and possibilities relating to women's rise to leadership.

A qualitative case study conducted in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa exposed unique hindrances that female educational managers were facing, which were related to networking issues, corrupt recruitment processes, family dynamics, organizational structures, and external variables such as terrorism and politics (Taj, 2016). Taj emphasizes that strategies such as professional development, teamwork, acknowledgment, flexibility, and accountability are necessary in order to overcome these challenges.

A qualitative study in Pakistan further continues to explore the institutional, cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors that contribute toward the violence against women (Qaisrani et al., 2016). To improve the situations, Qaisrani, Tahira Batool, Muthur Mansoor Qaisrani & Tariq Mahmood Qaisrani (2016) underline the pervasive effects of patriarchal institutions on women's lives and call for a change in the conservative attitude. Moreover, exploratory research on Pakistan uses a relational framework for explaining the multi-level potential of women's careers

through elements at the macro, meso, and micro levels (Sarwar & Imran, 2019). The study highlighted macro-level barriers, such as religious interpretation, sociocultural elements, and *Sifarish*, and recommended remedies such as workplace practices that are stringent and define Islamic norms.

Further, the analysis of family structure norms evidences system-level problems of gender inequalities in Pakistan, particularly in connection with higher education, transportation, and gender equity (Ghazi et al., 2011). Ghazi and his colleagues call for legislations that will increase gender inclusion, increasing the accessibility of education, and ensuring that women will have more say in matters to be decided. Moreover, Gul & Fayaz (2022) pay attention to women's contribution to the settlement of disputes within Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where the established system of Jirga, though highly successful, prevents women from decision-making. They also examine the contributions of women in maintaining peace and resolving conflicts in that area. This gender-based restriction emanates from the very patriarchal foundation that Pakhtun civilization has. In Khwendo Jirga (2013) challenged this convention by providing an avenue for females to express themselves. The objectives of Gul and Fayaz are to find reasons behind Khwendo Jirga, assess its impacts on society, and critically examine the unique impacts it has on women. This research fits with the descriptive style used, employing qualitative data acquired from interviews with female Jirga members, residents, and those affected. It adds knowledge to the challenges and success that are associated with the integration of women in conflict resolution in the area (Gul & Fayaz, 2022). Moreover, based on a global institutional study, the following are important factors that determine whether or not women participate in political leadership (Bullough et al., 2012). In order to increase women's participation in political leadership, the research thus indicated the necessity to assess institutional issues at the societal

level, such as the business environment, social development, economic concerns, political freedom, and culture.

Furthermore, women's empowerment and development are just as important to the growth of a community as men's. Since the 1980s, women empowerment and sociocultural transformation have been the focus of participatory development techniques in Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, especially before and after the conflict and flood catastrophes of 2007–2010 (Elahi et al., 2015). Elahi and colleagues use qualitative methodologies to find that pre-crisis participatory development had a favourable impact on women's empowerment and socio-economic circumstances. Crises, however, prevented participation, highlighting the importance of flexibility. According to the research, participatory development should be used after a catastrophe to guarantee fair distribution of humanitarian relief and long-term socioeconomic recovery (Elahi et al., 2015). Furthermore, phenomenological research conducted in Ghana investigates how female principals deal with cultural conventions to lead in a patriarchal environment (Brion & Ampah-Mensah, 2021). The results imply that female leaders can contribute to gender parity in educational leadership by progressively changing cultural beliefs.

It is also stated that gender discrimination exists in the economic sphere, where obstacles to women's economic advancement include vested interest groups, early marriages, the joint family system, illiteracy, and societal disfavour towards female employment (Gul & Fayaz, 2022). These factors emphasize the socio-cultural barrier. It is noteworthy that in Pukhtun society, the literacy rates of men are higher than those of women, and that women's economic empowerment is further hindered by religious prohibitions and the wearing of *Purdah* (veils). Literature has it that such issues require strategies that advance socio-cultural



values supportive of women's economic empowerment. Such strategies include education programs, more work opportunities, increased decision-making authority, and the correction of excessively misinterpreted religious concepts (Imran et al., 2012).

The reviewed literature underlines how cultural norms and women in leadership, in both Swat and KPK, co-relate. The most important factors to consider will be the impacts of religious and corporate cultures, challenges faced by female educational leaders, and cultural constraints on women moving up the ladder. All of these efforts take part in addressing gender-based violence, family structural norms, and several professional opportunities that enhance the overall discourse of women's leadership. To effectively empower women leaders in Swat, KPK, and beyond, one has to recognize the impact of cultural norms. Further research and helpful interventions should be done based on these findings to advance gender equality and strength in women's leadership.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study is qualitative in nature, and semi-structured interviews are the main technique used to obtain data. Specifically, interviews allow for a profound description of individual experiences, attitudes, and obstacles experienced within the specific cultural context of Swat. The interviews gave in-depth information about how cultural norms impact women's leadership. In the selection process, purposive sampling is used to ensure diversity in the participants across sectors, like the public sector, private industry, and civil society. In the process, there was consideration for cultural sensitivity, bearing in mind the regional background and traditions.

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### **Theoretical Framework**

Feminism is the theoretical framework that guides this study. Particularly the concept given in *The Second Sex* (De Beauvoir, 2016) that women are mostly treated as “Other Beings” (Bergoffen & Burke, 2004). Understanding the women leading in cultural contexts involves an awareness of power relations, gender roles, and the dimensions of patriarchy. The perspective of feminism provides the ability to view all these topics. This study uses feminist viewpoints in examining and understanding the complicated relationship that exists between women's leadership and cultural norms in Swat.

### **Data Collection**

In this study, data were collected from four women leaders who had different leadership roles and experiences. The following questions were asked from the interviews during the interview;

1. What do you think about cultural norms in Swat?
2. How do you think cultural norms in Swat, affect women's leadership roles?
3. What specific cultural practices do you believe impact women's ability to become leaders in Swat?

### **Analysis**

Thematic analysis is utilized to find recurrent themes, patterns, and differences in the interviews provided by the participants. Data were categorized using coding, and ongoing comparisons were made to guarantee a detailed grasp of how cultural norms affect women in leadership roles. The research endeavours to reveal underlying cultural norms that influence and mould women's leadership in Swat KPK.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Cultural Norms

#### Traditional Gender Role

In KPK Swat, there is a prevailing cultural norm that assigns women the primary responsibility of managing home affairs, while limiting their involvement in leadership posts. It is anticipated that they will give priority to their families and fulfil a nurturing and supportive role within the household. Women are sometimes discouraged from seeking leadership positions due to societal expectations that limit their roles and responsibilities.

Furthermore, traditional gender stereotypes significantly limit the ability of women to become educated and skilled. Because of gender stereotypes, girls are often deprived of equal education as compared to boys, and the image of females not being able to become leaders is further solidified.

#### Male Dominance

Social formation in KPK, Swat, is embedded within the patriarchal system in which males lead and dominate over both the domestic sphere and society at large. High prevalence of male domination makes it a serious challenge for women aspiring for leadership roles. Most of them, in one or the other way, have to face a lot of resistance and discrimination as they struggle to break through the impediments in their way for getting elevated to the role occupied by males for many years.

In a society that practices patriarchal dominance, the choices for a woman are not only restricted, but they also tend to demean the abilities and values of women. It is this very traditionally ingrained belief system that keeps on perpetuating the vicious cycle of gender inequality, hence women being considered inferior to men for positions of leadership.

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## **Women Leadership Challenges**

One of the great challenges women face in KPK Swat is family and community support and encouragement. Cultural conventions usually discourage women from pursuing careers and leadership roles outside the household. These kinds of isolations are discouraging, and such backgrounds come out to affect the ability of women to navigate the challenges of leadership positions.

The second barrier is lack of resources and networks. Women are usually barred from access to networks and resources that are basic to getting ahead at work and developing leadership. If they can't have access, this will hinder their development and reduce the potential of making a difference in their communities.

Besides, they face highly great obstacles concerning gender bias and discrimination. Many a time, women in leadership positions face prejudices and biases that will be termed against their capabilities and potentials. All the biasness may lead to the limiting of their professional progress and, in addition, lead to a bad working environment that will result in the affecting of their success.

## **Opportunities**

There are also chances of overcoming the odds for women in KPK Swat to get into these leadership positions. One of the opportunities is the increasing awareness and realization of the importance of gender equity and women's empowerment. The collaborative work of local organizations, governmental initiatives, and foreign aid has created an upward trend in empowering the women and building their leadership potentials.

Also, with the changes in global workforce patterns and recognition of the importance of diversity, it paved the way for women to lead. More organizations realize that recruiting women talent at the leadership level has a lot of benefits and

are, therefore, making conscious efforts to increase the proportion of female talent in their workforce.

Besides, with the advent of social media and technological advancement, women now have a platform on which they can express their skills and expertise. Women in KPK Swat are free to use these facilities to communicate, build relationships, and enhance their reputation as leaders in their respective domains.

### **Low Representation**

Another major outcome of such cultural norms affecting female leadership in KPK Swat is that there will be a major gender gap in this respect at leadership levels. Expected roles and biases keep women from taking their rightful place in local and national decision-making bodies. Policies and practices in unrepresented places cannot be as progressive, since they suffer from the deficit of women's views and experiences. Furthermore, the lack of role models and mentors exacerbates the challenges for aspiring women leaders, as they are left without the guidance and support to equip them in finding the way through the labyrinth of leadership.

### **Stereotype and Bias**

Cultural norms in KPK Swat often promote stereotypes and biases against women and impact their leadership aspirations directly. Conventional gender roles prescribe a caring and nurturing role for women, while men are considered fit for leadership. It is these deep-rooted misconceptions that create prejudices against the ability to lead by women and hence set a limitation on their capability. In most cases, women face undue scrutiny where their competence and capability are put into question just because of their gender. There is an overt and concerted need to challenge and dismantle the current status quo if one has to break through these biases and build a more inclusive environment that appreciates and values the leadership capabilities of women.

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## CONCLUSION

The cultural limitations to the development of women's leadership in KPK Swat are huge. Cultural norms, such as purdah, which incorporate rigid gender segregation and restricted mobility, have greatly curtailed active participation by women in leading public life. Women's access to those areas where major decision making occurs is seriously restricted, which seriously hinders the potentiality of them influencing policy formulation and change within their communities. Such cultural norms further perpetuate gender inequalities, which impede women's leadership opportunities. A holistic approach needs to be designed with strategies engaging stakeholders and community leaders in questioning and reshaping the most prevalent customs and behaviors.

Without a doubt, cultural norms are one of the biggest influencers in the participation of women in leadership positions in KPK Swat. Since women pursue leadership roles, they have to go through a host of problems, such as weak support, opposition, lack of opportunities, low representation, stereotyping, biases, and cultural restrictions. Still, change must be recognized as one of the ways forward. For women leaders to flourish in KPK Swat, men will have to be actively their allies, promoters, and champions of gender equality. This can be done by first recognizing and challenging the existing norms and biases, then providing opportunities for women to develop their leadership and the ability to exercise that leadership. For KPK Swat, these challenges have to be faced head-on in order to unlock the substantive potential of women leaders and foster a just and inclusive society.

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