

Evaluating Factors Contributing to Female Low Turnout in the Gujranwala District of the Punjab, Pakistan

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Kainat Ehsan¹ Adil Zaman² Muhammad Mushtaq³

Abstract: Women's political and electoral participation is indispensable for the success of the democratic process, as women account for more than half of the world's population. However, the literature indicates that men are more likely than women to vote worldwide. Evident in established democracies, this gender disparity is more critical in developing democracies. Based on the most recent elections in 2024 in Pakistan, it has been observed that 42 percent of women cast their vote against the 52 percent of men. Numerous factors hinder female electoral participation, including social, economic, political, and institutional factors that hinder women's political participation in Pakistan. Gender disparity in voter turnout exists in liberal and electoral democracies. Although the gender gap is shrinking in Western democracies, it continues to persist in most developing societies of the Global South. There are various socio-political and structural factors contributing to low voter turnout. Against this backdrop, the primary goal of this paper is to examine the gender gap in voter turnout and identify social barriers and institutional hurdles influencing political participation in Punjab, using Gujranwala district as a case study. Using survey data, the research finds that social barriers and institutional hurdles significantly influence female voter turnout. The study is limited to one district and evaluates four factors, arguing political parties must take necessary measures to improve female political engagement and turnout. The paper considers that societies can fully achieve democratic representation and participation by emphasizing gender equality in electoral procedures and creating an atmosphere that encourages female political participation.

Key Words: Low Female Voter Turnout, General Elections 2018 & 2024, Social Barriers, Institutional Barriers, Political Involvement, Economic Dependency, Women's Political Participation

Introduction

The role of women in electoral politics is generally acknowledged as a foundation of democratic systems. The presence of women in electoral politics is, in most cases, considered a fountain of democracies, although it remains a source of inequality and continues to be undermined in most regions across the globe (UN Women, 2024). Although the world population is composed almost of half women, they are so underrepresented even in the parliaments; in addition, they are underrepresented as voters in the simplest electoral practices (Nation, 2024). Despite all established democracies, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, France, or Canada, the percentage of women's representation in parliaments has always been lower than the representation in the population, which indicates the presence of basic structural and social-political barriers that hinder the full-fledged integration of women into the political arena (Stockemer, 2015; Blais, 2006). Globally, research has established that the electoral turnout of women is subject to the intricate nature of interactions between socioeconomic status, cultural ethics, institutionalization, political consciousness,

¹ M.Phil. Scholar in Political Science, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan. Email: kainatehsan41@gmail.com

² Lecturer, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan. Email: adil.zaman@uog.edu.pk

³ Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan. Email: Muhhammad.mushtaq@uog.edu.pk

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Corresponding Author: Adil Zaman (✉ adil.zaman@uog.edu.pk)

and security status, making voter turnout a gendered political behavior and not a democratic process (Kulachai, [2023](#); Rai, [2011](#)).

These problems are more intricate in developing democracies. Women have to endure various obstacles of poverty, illiteracy, limited movement, socialization with patriarchal values, and the ineffective system of institutional support (Aguilar, [2007](#); Petersen, [2019](#)). The South Asian democracies, such as Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, have been especially good examples that constitutional protection coexists with informal traditions that frown upon or even bar women from exercising their right to vote (Rai, [2011](#); Ghosh, [2022](#)). Though there has been some improvement in gender quotas, voter awareness campaigns, and changes in legislation in some countries of South Asia, women still vote less than men, especially in semi-urban and rural regions (Rai, [2011](#); Ghosh, [2022](#)).

Pakistan is one such example that can demonstrate the contradiction of formal equality and substantive inequality. The women in Pakistan enjoy equal political rights as stipulated in the Constitution of Pakistan and are guaranteed to take part in the electoral process by electoral legislation (Bari, [2005](#)). Nevertheless, women voters have been low compared to men during most general elections (Election Commission of Pakistan, [2017](#); Election Commission of Pakistan, [2018](#); Shaikh, [2024](#)). The roots of gender biases, economic oppression, political illiteracy, bureaucratic challenges, and security problems are all factors that restrict the involvement of women in electoral politics (Awan, [2016](#); Thompson, [2021](#)). Tacit knowledge, family demands, or societal limitations that restrict individual freedom and choice are also some of the ways in which women do not exercise their right to vote in certain areas (Jatoi, [2023](#); Yaseen, [2023](#)). These barriers are not national but rather regional, based on classes and political culture (Begum, [2023](#)).

The province of Punjab is the most populous in Pakistan and plays a significant role in the general electoral process in the country (Election Commission of Pakistan, [2018](#)). There is also a certain system of voting, which is affected by strong social values, baradari organizations, and political parties (Awan, [2016](#); Yaseen, [2023](#)). Punjab province is a district with a variety of districts, with one of the most fascinating scenarios to observe the women's electoral participation being District Gujranwala. Despite comparatively high access to infrastructure and administrative facilities in Gujranwala compared with other rural areas, voter turnout remains very low (Election Commission of Pakistan, [2017](#); Shaikh, [2024](#)). This indicates that structural and cultural barriers are among the main influences on women's voting patterns, rather than administrative ones (Amjad, [2021](#); Thompson, [2021](#)). Therefore, the district can serve as an appropriate empirical setting for examining the interplay among social impediments, economic participation, institutional accessibility, and political awareness in influencing female voter turnout.

In this regard, the present study seeks to quantitatively establish the determinants of women's electoral participation in the District of Gujranwala. The research contributes to the current information on the gendered political behavior in Pakistan by focusing on the empirical research of measurable variables, including social values, economic participation, institutional accessibility, and political awareness (Begum, [2023](#); Yaseen, [2023](#)). Rather than viewing the low voter turnout among women as a cultural problem, this research paper tries to place it in a structural and institutional context, still facing women in Pakistan, hampering their effective participation in political activities (Bari, [2005](#); Thompson, [2021](#)). Through a regression analysis, the study will determine the most significant factors that hinder the voting pattern by women to establish empirical evidence that will help inform the policy action, electoral changes, and gender-based civic participation in Pakistan (Blais, [2006](#); Stockemer, [2015](#)).

Literature Review

In modernized countries such as the United States of America, it was only after 1920 that women acquired the right to vote after the 19th Constitutional Amendment, after a long struggle (Women Suffrage, [2009](#)). In 1893, New Zealand became the first nation to allow females to vote, and by 1960, over 50 percent of the total number of nations worldwide had enfranchised the female gender (Women Suffrage, [2009](#)). Other recent countries to embrace women's involvement in national elections include Bhutan, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait. Women are not exercising their voting rights effectively even in a formally enfranchised state because of legal and cultural obstacles (Aguilar, [2004](#); Petersen, [2019](#)).



The global and Pakistani literature singles out a multidimensional and interconnected set of factors that affect the electoral participation of women. Patriarchal norms, narrow gender roles, and control over women's mobility and voting have always been mentioned as some of the biggest limitations due to socio-cultural factors (Bari, [2005](#); Awan, [2016](#); Begum, [2023](#)). The economic issues, such as low income, higher barriers to paid jobs, and the lack of education, further suppress the political awareness of women and increase the opportunity cost of voting (Amjad, [2021](#); Kulachai, [2023](#)). Women are disproportionately impacted by institutional and administrative barriers to voting, including voter registration, the lack of identity documentation, inadequate access to women-friendly polling stations, and poor law enforcement (Election Commission of Pakistan, [2017](#); Jatoi, [2023](#)). Political education and activism are also of utmost importance since more women being exposed to civic education and party outreach tend to engage in the election (Boulding, [2010](#); Kulachai, [2023](#)). Women are also discouraged by security issues and electoral violence, which particularly affect their participation in the political environments that are politically contested (ODIHR, [2022](#)). Also, the degree of female participation and party-wide promises of gender balance have a positive effect on the voter turnout of women by increasing the political effectiveness and representation (UN Women, [2024](#)).

The vast literature on the electoral process of women in Pakistan highlights that patriarchal values, conservative gender ideologies, and family control are the most notable obstacles to women's participation in politics (Bari, [2005](#); Awan, [2016](#); Thompson, [2021](#)). Both rural and urban women are subjected to the socio-cultural barriers of limited mobility and social stigma (Yaseen, [2023](#)). The insufficient level of political awareness and participation ability among women is also caused by economic dependency, lack of education, and lack of employment (Amjad, [2021](#)). The institutional weaknesses, including the constitutional guarantees and reserved seats, are not addressed, which is caused by the fact that the gender-sensitive electoral policies are not implemented properly, voters are not facilitated properly, and party support is not provided (Election Commission of Pakistan, [2018](#); Jatoi, [2023](#)). The level of political awareness and participation is still unbalanced with the lack of civic education and insufficiency of including women in the party decision-making systems, keeping women low in electoral participation (Begum, [2023](#)).

Thus, the present study provides relevance to the literature on the topic by investigating the social barriers, economic participation, institutional constraints, and political participation issues and their impacts on the electoral participation of women in the District of Gujranwala, in Punjab. It is theorized that these variables are statistically significant and measurably influence electoral participation among women, with greater social and institutional barriers being related to lower levels of female voter turnout (Blais, [2006](#); Stockemer, [2015](#)).

Materials and Methods

The study was based on a quantitative research design to investigate the impediments affecting women's electoral participation in District Gujranwala, Punjab, through a cross-sectional survey study, a common method of research in voter turnout and political participation (Blais, [2006](#); Stockemer, [2015](#)). The questionnaire was designed based on the comprehensive literature review of the topic of women in politics, voter turnout, and gender-based limitations to political participation in Pakistan and similar settings (Bari, [2005](#); Awan, [2016](#); Begum, [2023](#); Kulachai, [2023](#)). The questionnaire was also aligned to the theoretical framework and conceptual model of the study since it puts emphasis on the social barriers, economic participation, institutional constraints, and political engagement as the major explanatory variables, which are in line with previous empirical studies on the women voter turnout (Amjad, [2021](#); Thompson, [2021](#)).

The analysis of the data was done by the use of the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS). The paradigm used in the research was that of positivism, which focused on objectivity and empirical validation, which is typical of quantitative research on electoral behaviour (Blais, [2006](#)). A generalization on the voter turnout of women was developed using an inductive means in light of field-based empirical research.

The research universe was District Gujranwala in Punjab, Pakistan. The district was chosen because the female voter turnout was constantly low, despite a comparatively higher administrative accessibility and political importance, which was emphasized by the official electoral statistics and recent election analysis (Election Commission of Pakistan,

[2017](#); Election Commission of Pakistan, [2018](#); Shaikh, [2024](#)). The objective population was registered female voters of 18 years and above, as maintained by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). The district has 1,708,264 male voters and 1,346,734 female voters registered on five National Assembly and fourteen Provincial Assembly seats (Election Commission of Pakistan, [2018](#)).

The sampling frame was based on voter lists in the ECP office in Gujranwala and the polling station-based information in the ECP site so that the gender and geographic sample is balanced as suggested in electoral participation measurement studies (Jatoi, [2023](#)). District Gujranwala is administratively divided into four tehsils, namely, Gujranwala City, Gujranwala Saddar, Kamoke, and Nowshera Virkan. Two union councils (one urban and one rural) were chosen per tehsil to represent spatial diversity in the political participation of women, which is in line with the existing literature that suggests urban-rural differences in female turnout (Yaseen, [2023](#)). Probability random sampling was employed, whereby all eligible female voters had equal chances of being selected. Among all the questionnaires that were issued, 407 out of 440 were filled out and could be analyzed.

The surveys were conducted by interviewing for more than three weeks in June 2024, which is especially appropriate regarding the use of the face-to-face survey tool in situations where the illiteracy rates among the female population are high, and they have limited access to digital tools (Bari, [2005](#); Thompson, [2021](#)). The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part of the questionnaire was used to collect socio-demographic details, while the second part was used to measure the variables of the study through the use of Likert scale items. The final sample was dominated by young females, with 66.3 percent of the respondents belonging to the age group of 18-24 years, followed by 22.9 percent belonging to the age group of 25-34 years. In terms of marital status, 80.3 percent of the respondents were unmarried, while 19.7 percent were married. The educational attainment of the respondents was relatively high, with 56.0 percent of the respondents having fourteen years of education, 17.0 percent having sixteen years of education, and 12.8 percent having completed eighteen years of education; only a small proportion (1.7 percent) had a PhD degree. In terms of occupational status, the majority of the respondents (65.4 percent) were unemployed, followed by those who were full-time employed (22.9 percent), part-time employed (7.9 percent), and homemakers (3.9 percent). In terms of the area of residence, 56.0 percent of the respondents belonged to urban areas, while 44.0 percent belonged to rural localities.

The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, including multiple regression analysis, to examine the relationships between social, economic, institutional, and political factors and female voter turnout in District Gujranwala.

Data Analysis

Correlation Analysis

The correlation analysis indicates that there is a positive and statistically significant correlation between social, economic, political, and institutional determinants and women's electoral participation in District Gujranwala. The moderate association between social factors and electoral participation ($r = .400$, $p < .01$) proves the results that family support, social acceptance, and cultural norms are defining factors of the voting pattern of women in Pakistan (Bari, [2005](#); Awan, [2016](#); Begum, [2023](#)).

Likewise, the notable correlation between the economic variables and electoral turnout ($r = .356$, $p = .01$) confirms the fact that economic independence and lessened financial necessity improve the political participation of women (Amjad, [2021](#); Kulachai, [2023](#)). Political factors are most correlated with voter participation ($r = .453$, $p < .01$), which supports the literature that stresses the importance of political awareness, party mobilization, and media exposure as influencing factors in voter turnout, specifically in developing democracies (Blais, [2006](#); Boulding, [2010](#)).

The fact that institutional factors are positively related to electoral participation ($r = .400$, $p < .01$) shows that there is an interdependence between the structural variables despite the fact that institutional effects are often weak when social and political factors are overpowering—a point that is commonly discussed in the literature on weak democracies (Thompson, [2021](#); Jatoi, [2023](#)).



Table I*Correlations among Study Variables*

Variables	Social factors	Economic Factors	Political factors
Economic Factors	.278**		
Political factors	.430**	.446**	
Institutional Factors	.474**	.151**	.343**
Electoral Participation	.400**	.356**	.453**

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Multiple Regression Analysis

The multiple linear regression model is statistically significant, indicating that social, economic, political, and institutional factors jointly explain variation in female voter turnout. The R^2 value of 0.282 suggests that nearly 28.2% of the variation in women's electoral participation is explained by the model, which is consistent with turnout models in developing political systems (Blais, 2006; Stockemer, 2015).

The ANOVA results ($F = 39.400$, $p < .001$) confirm the robustness of the model, supporting the argument that women's voting behaviors are shaped by structural and contextual constraints rather than individual choice alone (Kulachai, 2023; Thompson, 2021).

The summary of the model shows that the R value is 0.531, which implies that there is a moderate positive relationship between the independent variables and female electoral participation. The value of R-squared (0.282) indicates that social barriers, economic opportunities, political engagement, and institutional barriers can explain around 28.2 percent of the difference in the voter turnout among females. The adjusted R-squared of 0.274 indicates that the model is sound even when the number of predictors has been considered. The standard error of the estimate (4.419) indicates that the model is not bad with regard to the accuracy of the prediction.

The results of ANOVA can also be used to prove the strength of the model substantially. Statistical significance of the regression model is also significant ($F = 39.400$, $p < .001$), which means that collectively the independent variables play an important role in predicting female electoral participation in the 2018 and 2024 general elections. This can be used to prove the argument that structural and contextual factors are the determining factors in women's voting in Gujranwala.

The coefficients of regression are also useful to provide additional information about the contribution of each barrier. It is found that social factors are also a strong predictor of voter turnout among females ($B = 0.324$, $\beta = 0.257$, $p < .001$). This implies that social influences, which include family support, cultural attitudes, movement limitations, and approval of voting rights of women, play a significant role in influencing the voting behaviour of the female population. The higher the social acceptance and family support, the higher the female electoral participation.

There is also a positive economic effect on the turnout of the female voters with a strong influence ($B = 0.175$, $\beta = 0.164$, and $p = .001$). The outcome is in line with the questionnaire variables of financial dependency, transportation expenses, employment, and financial hardships. Women who have more economic opportunities and possess fewer economic limitations are bound to participate in the voting process.

Of all the predictors, the political factors show the greatest effect on the participation of the female voters in the electoral process ($B = 0.355$, $\beta = 0.288$, $p < .001$). This means that political awareness, exposure to campaigns, political parties, freedom of political expression, and media are important in motivating women to participate in the voting process. The value of the standardized coefficient is high, which indicates that the most effective factor to determine the voting attendance of women in the Gujranwala situation is the political engagement of women.

On the contrary, the institutional factors are not statistically significant in their impact on the voter turnout of female voters ($B = -0.061$, $\beta = -0.055$, $p = .257$). This implies that there is a lack of a significant relationship between female voter turnout and the perceived level of electoral transparency, accessibility of polling points, electoral regulations, and

the role played by the Election Commission, even after social, economic, and political factors have been controlled. There is also the presence of institutional hurdles, although their direct influence appears less important than socio-cultural and political aspects.

Social influences become a strong predictor of female voter participation and highlight the conclusive aspect of patriarchal standards, family consent, and mobility limitations, which are widely recorded in Pakistan-based studies (Bari, 2005; Awan, 2016; Yaseen, 2023). Economic considerations are also a determinant of turnout, which confirms the fact that women's political participation is determined by financial dependency and employment status (Amjad, 2021).

Political factors have the strongest influence, and it is proven that the voting by women is driven by political awareness, exposure to campaigns, and involvement in political parties (Boulding, 2010; Kulachai, 2023). Conversely, the institutional factors are not found to be statistically different, and therefore institutional barriers do influence the outcome, but in a way that it becomes less pronounced once considering social and political constraints, which is in line with the previous studies in Pakistan (Jatoi, 2023; Thompson, 2021).

Table

Multiple Linear Regression Results of Determinants of Women's Electoral Participation

Hypotheses	Regression weights	B	t	p-value	Results
H1	SOFA → ELPA	.324	5.028	.000	Supported
H2	ECFA → ELPA	.175	3.457	.001	Supported
H3	POFA → ELPA	.355	5.614	.000	Supported
H4	INFA → ELPA	-.061	-1.134	.257	Partially Supported
R ² =	0.282				
F=	39.400				

Electoral Participation (ELPA) = Dependent variable

Discussion and Conclusion

The present paper demonstrates that low voter turnout among women in the District Gujranwala is a complicated phenomenon, with social, economic, political, and institutional factors contributing to it. Social aspects were found to be the greatest inhibitor, which is also in line with the earlier research carried out on the same topic in Pakistan and other less developed countries (Bari, 2005; Noor & Yaseen, 2023; Paxton & Hughes, 2014). Such factors as patriarchal values, housekeeping, lack of mobility, and the unwillingness of family members to support the participation of women in the electoral process are significant discouraging factors. These findings are in line with other research works in the international community that have indicated that cultural and household variables are the gatekeepers of women's political participation, particularly in societies with strongly entrenched patriarchal ideals (Norris & Inglehart, 2001).

Another factor that affects the electoral process is the economic factors. Economically independent women, having ensured their economic status, had a higher propensity to take part in the electoral process; however, low-income women were severely challenged by transport costs, economic reliance on male family members, and economic insecurity. This is in line with the literature that indicates economic empowerment as one of the aspects that enable political empowerment (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995; Kabeer, 2012). In a society that faces the expensive voting process, it is agreeable that economic dependency is a significant discouragement to the electoral process in line with other developing economies (Israr et al., 2021).

The involvement and awareness of the political activities contributed to the turnout but were not sufficient in order to break the structural and social barriers. Exposure to party campaigns, manifestos, and media coverage was positively associated with voting, and this concurs with the significance of political socialization among the young democracies (Ishiyama, 2016). Nevertheless, this does not exclude the observation that although there are some positive changes in the 2018 and 2024 elections, the reality that low turnout was an issue that could not be conquered by mere

awareness implies that there are fundamental social and institutional challenges that can be addressed only through awareness.

There are also institutional factors that are causing the problem. Some of the challenges identified by the respondents include challenges in accessing the polling points, inadequate facilitation by the electoral bodies, and a lack of information about elections. The findings are not new, as past studies have established that legally acquired citizenship without institutional support is not sufficient to guarantee political participation (Bari, [2005](#); Noor & Yaseen, [2023](#)). Institutional failure, combined with social and economic barriers, gives rise to a self-reinforcing cycle whereby women are not able to vote even well-motivated women have institutional and logistical barriers that reduce their likelihood of voting.

Besides, the study has indicated that there are urban-rural discrepancies in female electoral participation. Females in urban areas were more politically aware, and they had fewer mobility restrictions as opposed to rural females, who had social and institutional barriers to mobility. The urban-rural divide is consistent with the South Asian studies highlighting the significance of geographic disparities in female political engagement (Chowdhury & Krebs, [2010](#)), which suggests that context-specific solutions are required to enhance the level of female electoral participation.

To sum up, the results stated above clearly lead to the assumption that the low electoral turnout in Gujranwala by women cannot be attributed to only one factor but rather to a compound of social, economic, political, and institutional challenges. These findings correspond to global perspectives regarding gender differences in voter turnout (Norris & Inglehart, [2001](#); Paxton & Hughes, [2014](#)), which explains the significance of interventions at multiple tiers in order to reduce structural, cultural, and procedural barriers.

Conclusion

In this paper, the author has examined the current gender disparity in voter turnout in the 2018 and 2024 general elections in the District of Gujranwala. The findings indicate that certain social barriers, economic reliance, low political participation, and institutional inefficiency are a combination of these factors leading to low turnout of women. The most significant ones were social and cultural barriers, namely, the patriarchal societies and limitations in mobility, and economic instability and institutional inefficiencies further lowered the turnout. By offering empirical evidence at a district level, this paper will contribute to the current body of research on the subject of gender and political participation in developing nations. This paper is different from the existing studies that consider the issue at the national or provincial level, as it analyzes the issue at the local level and indicates the specific factors that hinder the electoral participation of women.

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