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Article

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Women's political representation in the local governance of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study to identify the role of women in political agenda at Azad Jammu Kashmir. The political parties are always considered main gatekeepers to women's political representation. Existing scholarship highlights the significance of centralized political institutions (parties) with structured set up for the effective representation of women at different levels. However, the functioning of these institutions is greatly influenced by the social and cultural context of a country in which they operate.

Design methodology/approach – This paper mainly analyzes social and cultural practices and those informal ways that operate within the exited democratic government setup and creates serious obstacles for women's effective political representation at the party level. For this purpose, a qualitative research methodology is used to get the full insight of the issue at hand. The authors conducted 25 in-depth interviews with women members of three different political parties.

Findings – The results revealed that both (social context and political structure) have a significant impact on women's nature and level of participation in the political processes in Azad Jammu and Kashmir.

Originality value – Prevailing social and political context of Pakistan does not support a truly democratic and centralized political system. Parties are weak entities with the less democratic organizational structure, which ultimately have a negative impact on women's political representation.

Keywords Azad Jammu Kashmir, Socio-cultural impediments, Women political representation, Undemocratic processes of political parties

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

A democratic political system has a key role in ensuring and promoting gender equity to stand as the most representative institution by mainstreaming gender into all parliamentary processes, government policies, budgetary and expenditure decisions. Gender mainstreaming is the most important process to eradicate misrepresentation (Meier *et al.*, 2005). The scholarship highlights the institutionalized setup and a party system for women's effective representation at different decision-making positions not only within the



party but also at national levels (Norris, 1997; Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Hinojosa, 2005, 2009; Vivian Roza, 2010; Matland, 2005). The low involvement and interest of women have been a concern for researchers in this field.

The statistical evidence reveals that among 193 United Nations member countries, only 11 women are heads of governments. Besides, the women's participation and representation in politics is only 5.7% across the globe (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018; United Nations Development Program, 2017). Even the world's superpower, the USA, has never had a female president. Despite unsuitable structures and nominal female participation, Pakistan elected Benazir Bhutto as the Prime Minister for two terms, in 1988-1990 and 1993-1996. Similarly, women politicians have been elected state heads of Bangladesh and India such as Sheikh Hasina Wazed and Indira Gandhi, respectively. There have been extremely influential women politicians such as Sonia Gandhi, Mayavati Das, Hinna Rabbani Khar, Fehmida Mirza, Kashmala Tariq and Sharmila Farooqi.

In the South Asian context, political parties play a vital role to bring women forward to the political leadership and electoral offices. The gender gap in political participation has been the most studied phenomenon in the context of developed countries (Huyser *et al.*, 2017). Nevertheless, not much research has been done in the context of developing countries. Therefore, our understanding of the issue of women's political representation in the political system of Pakistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir remains limited. Several international studies explored the dimensions of the internal culture of political parties such as transparency in recruitment processes and party's official affairs and attitude toward the implementation of policies and allocation of decision-making positions (Caul, 1999; Pitre, 2003; Hinojosa, 2005; 2009).

The overall social and political structure determines parties' attitude toward delivering its main objectives and goals (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Norris, 1997). Thus, the functioning of these parties is directly affected by the social and political context of a region in which they operate. Unlike the democratic/centralized party structure for women in developed countries, Pakistan's social and political context does not support a truly democratic political system, specifically for women. Despite remarkable representation (33%) given to women at the local government level as a result of the 2001 devolution of powers plan, there exists a long gap in their real and true representation in Pakistan. The structure of political parties severely restricts women's substantive representation in the political processes in Pakistan (Fleschenberg and Bari, 2015).

Political parties in Pakistan are weak entities with a less democratic organizational structure, which ultimately negatively affects women's political representation. As an organization, political parties show highly authoritative, male-dominated and a dynastic political culture that blocks women's formal entrance into the political processes (Bari, 2005, 2016). Women experience an unsupportive social and political environment at the party level, and currently, parties do not offer full space and support to all women politicians in Pakistan (Legislative Watch Report, 2013). Furthermore, the perceptions of women's mobility, interaction on and communication patterns also negatively influence party executives' choices to select aspiring potential candidates for party positions (Awan, 2016; Bari, 2015a, 2015b).

In the light of the above-stated facts, this paper provides an insight into the undemocratic processes that influence women's exclusion or less representation at higher decision-making positions in their respective parties. We also explored the nature of social and cultural impediments for women workers, specifically for those who are actively working at lower levels (union council, and district) within their parties. Moreover, the analysis of these challenges would show to what extent parties are organized and providing spaces to women workers at the grassroots levels.

The next sections of the paper represent a review of the relevant literature, highlight our central themes for the study and then explain our research method. The following sections present results and discussion and conclusion, research limitations and future research directions.

The state of Azad Jammu and Kashmir

The government of Azad Jammu and Kashmir was established on October 24, 1947. However, it was in 1974, when a parliamentary democratic system was introduced under the Azad Jammu and Kashmir Interim Constitution Act. Despite an independent state, Pakistani politicians and soldiers have a strong influence (both direct and indirect) on the political processes of Azad Kashmir's political system¹. Thus, the state reflects comparatively the same political culture as existed and practiced in Pakistan. The president legislative assembly of Azad Jammu and Kashmir is comprised of 49 members, with only five reserved seats for women (10%) [1]. Similarly, women's proportion at party levels is significantly low, which is far below their real strength in the population (Saher *et al.*, 2014).

Women's political representation and social-cultural context

Previous studies highlight the crucial role of customs, gender beliefs and religious values to decide women's spaces, social roles, access to higher education, economic opportunities and legal rights in South Asia (Norris and Inglehart, 2000; Gopalan, 2012; Syed *et al.*, 2005; True *et al.*, 2012). Generally, women in this region are sidelined from civil bureaucracies and feudal structures, which exclude their participation in the political arena (Goplan, 2012). Despite a remarkable increase (33%) in women's political representation at the local government in Pakistan, there exists a long gap in women's actual and true political representation. According to Bari (2005), women's participation in public life is restricted due to the paternalistic social and political context of the South Asian region. Women are not considered politically compatible, and their representation is evaluated according to the traditional stereotypical gender beliefs that consider the political decision-making only as of the male domain (Zakar *et al.*, 2018; Fazal and Tariq, 2016). Therefore, gender belief about women's status and roles plays a fundamental role to decide their level of participation in public life (Majid *et al.*, 2008; the Asia Pacific Human Development Report, 2010; Sharma, 2014; Jabeen and Jadoon, 2009).

Generally, women's mobility, career and life choices mostly controlled by the family, tribe, baradari and local customs. Women do not experience a personal and independent life, but life mostly dependent to follow the family and society's expectations. Women do not take part in the electoral processes as personal voters to select the candidate of their choice (Shaheed, 2002, 2010; Bari, 2005, 2015a, 2015b). Under such circumstances, women experience a passive political environment, and most of the time, many women psychologically internalize that perhaps the public sphere (politics) is not for them (Bilal, 2006).

Challenges at the party level

An analysis of the earlier research highlights the significance of highly centralized party systems to offer them equal opportunities, access and choice for decision-making positions under the party rules (Norris, 1997; Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Hinojosa, 2005). Thus, the role of centralized political setup, more specifically, at the party level, is highly significant for women's representation at different decision-making positions at the party and national levels. However, political parties with less centralized party systems are less likely to follow the formal rules and ways for different party affairs (Norris, 1997; Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Hinojosa, 2005).

Focusing on the centralized organizational setup, i.e. parties and its implications for women's political representation, [Matland \(2002\)](#) highlights three crucial steps to analyze women's political representation at different levels. Each step is significant and has its own value for women's political representation. At the most elementary stage, there is a pool of "eligible" (citizens who meet the legal and formal need to become legislature). Among those eligible, the only small group of people puts themselves forward as possible candidates – "aspirants" (second stage). From this small group, only a few secure the nomination by the party to become "candidate" (third stage). Finally, only a few are selected as a legislator by the voters ([Ballington and Matland, 2004](#); [Matland and Montgomery, 2003](#)) ([Figure 1](#)).

At the first stage, women do not experience any major constraint to join any political party ([Matland and Montgomery, 2003](#)). Thus, most of the parties hold a reasonable record of registered women members in their parties. Primarily, it is the second and third stages of the selection processes within the parties where women face numerous challenges for the selection of different positions. [Pitre \(2003\)](#) and [Matland \(2004\)](#) highlighted the importance of informal power struggle within the party members to secure a different position that matters in the nomination and recruitment processes. This creates serious obstacles for women's representation at different decision-making levels during the selection processes. Usually, in Pakistan, the selection is controlled by the faction leaders and loyalty; personal connections, kinship relations, networking are considered as crucial players in an informal power struggle ([Akhtar and Mushtaq, 2014](#)). Similarly, [Castillejo \(2013\)](#) maintained that in a less institutionalized party setup, parties provide more space and new opportunities to the people who are closer to the central power group, which is something very difficult for women in Pakistan in such social and political environment. These practices ignore the party rules, and the selection process negatively affects women's representation at different party positions.

More space for dynastic elite

It is significant to understand how this informal power struggle works in Azad Jammu and Kashmir's local political system and creates serious obstacles for women's access to higher positions within their respective parties. As discussed earlier, less democratic or less institutionalized party systems mostly run by political dynasties allow personal networks to play their role in the selection processes where candidates' selection does not depend on the party rules [Saleem et al. \(2019\)](#). These personal networks provide vital benefits to the party leadership in the form of constituency services, party funding, direct vote-buying and other personal favors ([Ballington and Matland, 2004](#); [Fleschenberg, 2008, 2013](#)). Therefore, there are always more chances for people from personal networks or dynastic elites to get an advantage over the non-dynastic elite in the recruitment and selection processes for different party positions. Likewise, the dynastic control of few members over party affairs provides a more favorable environment to the women of their own families to occupy more space and seats in the party affairs. Dynastic political leadership is a significant element of South Asia's political system, and it has provided more space to women who belong to the strong political

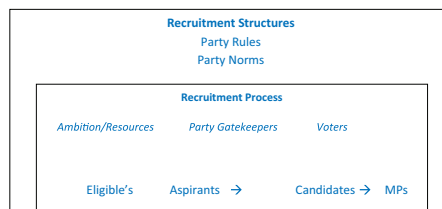


Figure 1.
Adapted from [Matland and Montgomery \(2003\)](#), recruiting women to national legislature. P.21

background, while common women workers within the political parties face many challenges to make some space in their political careers. The scholarship highlights that parties with weak structure bring forward factions where personalities, and not party ideologies, dominate the party system (Jahan, 1987; Butt and Victor, 2014; Siddiqui, 2014; Fleschenberg, 2008, 2013). Similarly, in Pakistan, parties mostly tend to weakly organize, set up around personalities and not stable structure, and lack the coherent ideological platform. As in the case of the Muslim League (N) where Kalsum Nawaz (wife of the former prime minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif) was elected as a member of the National Assembly due to his husband's disqualification from assembly seat. Usually, the top female political leaders have gained positions of power as a result of dynastic descent from influential political families (Fleschenberg, 2008; Jalalzai and Krook, 2010). Here, hereditary entitlement also plays an important role to get other net support from other parties that becomes a great hindrance for a capable candidate without any hereditary connections (Siddiqui, 2014). Generally, the dynastic political system has provided more space to women with a strong political background (Derichs and Thompson, 2004; Fleschenberg, 2008, 2013), while common women worker (members of political parties) still face many challenges of this informal features of a political system that create severe obstacles for them at different levels (Butt and Victor, 2014; Siddiqui, 2014; Derichs and Thompson, 2004; Fleschenberg, 2008, 2013). Similarly, in Pakistan, parties are weak entities with low party discipline; most do not have systematic records of their registered party members at different levels (Zakaria, 2016).

Lyon (2002) also examined the role of this informal power struggle and how it works in a local political system of Pakistan. He maintained that in the formal political structure of the Pakistani state, personal relationships are more important than organizational rules. The alliances are created on the patron-based distribution of resources and contacts. In this culture (based on the caste system of machine politics), the government does not focus to formulate and make public policies at large but to adjust their constituents into job, and in other words, doing out patronage in the form of government jobs. Consequently, benefits are distributed among the party members who are more closed to these networks. Candland (2007) also highlighted that parties are established on a local setup in Pakistan where candidate recruitment is mostly associated with his/her local influence and support based upon local biraderi [2], community, specific tribal or ethnic affiliation. Likewise, the cultural elements of biradari and vartan bhanji [3] work govern social relationships within the economic and political organizations in contemporary Pakistan (Lyon, 2002; Qadeer, 2006; Saher and Mayrhofer, 2014; Nasir and Mielke, 2015). Parties in Pakistan show influential people who hold power in a dynastic way at various localities. Thus, biradari is an important feature of the South Asian political system that co-exists with democracy as one of the important informal political institutions. Its significance cannot be ignored in political terms in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (Snedden, 2013). This factor dominates all the local political structures, as it works as a strong determinant of voting behavior at national as well as local levels. But, its impact is stronger at the rural- and local-level elections where caste is the primary determinant for voting. At the local level, these election campaigns are organized based on biradari (Lyon, 2002).

The factor of biradari support

Women's entrance in this traditional form of decision-making like jirgas [4], panchayat [5] is restricted that works as the primary platform to take part, keep up and hold a significant political share in these political processes (Pandey, 2005). Women are often not the head of tribes, communities or kinship groups that result in the form absence of constituents for them, which are leading factors for political survival in Pakistani political culture (Bari, 2005; Bari, 2015a, 2015b; NCSW, 2010). According to Shaheed (2004), the local power structure primarily

controlled by the traditional elites continues to influence people's lives even today's politics in Pakistan, and this has significant consequences for women's experiences, level of participation and access to political decision-making. First, women are not able to have any access to these informal power structures like panchayat, jirga, which are the prime, which is a major determinant of one's success in political processes. Second, these non-state institutions (panchayat, jirga, salish, biradari) are also significant to control women's everyday lives; therefore, they create serious obstruction to confine women's participation and access to power by cultural norms related to women's mobility, interaction and communication patterns (2004). Consequently, women do not have easy access to these resource networks and hence lack social capital (support of women's networks) that weakens their place in the ongoing political processes (Castillejo, 2013). Moreover, the beliefs and perceptions of women's mobility, interaction and communication patterns negatively influence party executives' choices to select aspiring potential women candidates for party positions (Awan, 2016; Bari, 2015a, 2015b; Legislative Watch Report, 2013). Besides, the absence of regular party elections results in dynastic politics that creates major obstructions for talented women to come forward at different decision-making positions within the parties (Zakaria, 2016; Awan, 2016).

The access to economic resources

Money plays a crucial role in the political processes to run party affairs and to organize expensive electoral campaigns. Women's less access to ownership of productive resources limits their scope of political activities, as politics has increasingly become commercialized. Therefore, women's participation gets affected by the competitive nature of politics where wealth works as a source of lucrative income and power, which men attempt to control (Saleem *et al.*, 2019). Women's limited access to economic resources and less ability to raise funds for the party put them in the disadvantageous position, especially when of nomination and selection of candidates for party tickets (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance International IDEA, 2015; Centre of Gender and Social Transformation Report, 2013). Women do not have enough representation in the upper stratum of the party decision-making positions. Women's wings within the parties do not have a sound impact to promote women as a candidate (Basu, 2005). Most political parties are largely family-run political entrepreneurship where leadership is strictly a family matter and passed from one generation to another (Mumtaz, 2005). Women at lower levels do not have easy access to these resource networks, and lack of social capital within the parties such as support of women's networks makes their status very weak in the ongoing political processes (Castillejo, 2013).

Issues of gender quotas

Today, around the world, more than 100 countries have some sort of quotas policy with the purpose to increase women's numbers in the political parties and legislatures (Krook and Zetterberg, 2014; Krook, 2009). Quotas as affirmative action are important for increasing women's political representation both at legislative and party levels. However, quota's application is also creating challenges and resistance (Dahlerup, 2005; Krook, 2009). According to Dutoya (2013), quotas (both at legislative and party level) encourage political elites to recognize biases with political representation, consider alternatives and new criteria for candidate selection. Fleschenberg and Bari also find the provisions of quotas to women as a good mean to increase the political representation of marginalized group, but at the same time, quotas create severe problems. According to their research, it is always male party leaders who hold the authority to select women on reserved seats. The indirect selection process poses serious challenges for those women who are politically more active at the grassroots levels. These women face discrimination in selection processes. Thus, women's

selection on reserved is completely a party's leadership task to pick women members by ignoring all formal ways and merits (2015). In Pakistan, quotas rarely meet their stated goals, despite introducing gender mainstreaming initiatives through implementing gender quotas to enhance women's position in the current political scenario. The patriarchal social and political structure constraint women's effective political representation both provisional and national levels (Zakar *et al.*, 2018).

Methods

Design

A qualitative research design is adopted to carry out this research. A qualitative and descriptive approach is opted to comprehend the real situation and meanings ascribed to the particular social phenomenon by the people who experience it (Creswell, 2014).

Research setting

In the political scenario of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, there are only three major political parties that hold a strong hold over AJK political system. These parties include Muslim Conference AJK, Pakistan People's Party AJK and Pakistan Muslim League (N) AJK. Therefore, we selected women members from these three parties who are working at different party positions. At the first level, researchers' links and official contacts helped to approach the respondents. The contacts of women at a legislative level were obtained from the official website of Azad Jammu and Kashmir legislative assembly. Besides, this primary researcher contacted the general secretaries of the parties to get the list of registered women members working at union council and district levels in their respective parties. The secretaries provided few contacts of the prominent women of their parties. We obtained other women members' contacts from these women.

Sampling

In the first phase, a total of 40 members from these three parties were contacted: 14 from the Muslim Conference, 13 from Pakistan People's Party and Muslim League (N). However, due to less response rate, we finally selected the sample of 25 women members before conducting the formal interviews with these members; ten from Muslim Conference, seven from Pakistan People's Party and eight from Muslim League (N).

Recruitment criteria

We recruited women members based on the criterion sampling method. The selected criteria for inclusion were:

- women members above 30 years;
- have equal to or more than five years political experience;
- occupying party positions at a various level such as zila sadar (district president) at the district level and city president; and
- members who served at the legislative levels on reserved seats.

Interview guide

We developed a short list of main themes from an extensive review of the literature before conducting the interviews. The researcher used these themes as an interview guideline with

follow-up questions (prob) related to the main themes to get a clearer explanation or clarification of respondents' perspectives.

The process of data collection

We conducted both face-to-face and telephonic interviews with the respondents in this research. There were only five in-depth face-to-face interviews conducted in Mirpur, Rawalpindi and Islamabad. The remaining 20 interviews were conducted on the telephone in different phases. It was really difficult to personally visit and conduct face-to-face interviews from all the respondents who belong to different districts of Azad Jammu and Kashmir such as Bagh, Mirpur, Neelum, Bhimber, Muzaffarabad and Rawlakot within the available time and resources.

Non-response and incomplete cases

Overall, 40 members were approached for this research. However, before the actual start of data collection, four members refused to take part, three members left the interviews incomplete (telephonic interview) and two members went out of the country. Out of 31 members, we could not contact the six members on their provided telephonic contact. In total, 25 women members completed the interviews and are included in the qualitative analysis.

Ethical approval

The researchers carefully considered the prerequisites for quality assurance and to maintain the integrity of the data. Besides this, all the respondents were formally informed about the nature and main goal of the research, which was important to build a rapport to conduct a good interview. After respondents' consent for interviews, an interview guide was provided to them through emails, and in some cases, through personal visits.

Confidentiality of the data

The interviews were conducted after the respondents' verbal informed consent. For confidentiality purposes, all the respondents were assigned fictitious codes. Respondents' names and designations are also kept confidential in the result section.

Data analysis

Thematic content analysis was carried out to study the phenomenon. The researchers noted the statements of the respondents. At the end of the interview, the researcher repeated the noted statements in front of the respondents for more clarity. The researcher maintained a daily activity-log book and field notes to keep the record of data collection. After completing the interviews, the collected data were transcribed and translated into English. In the next phases, we used an inductive approach in which themes were extracted from the obtained responses. The process of data reduction was performed manually. The obtained responses were classified into multiple themes, which were determined by consensus. The primary researcher carefully reviewed the interviews several times, which helped her to classify the responses under the particular theme and to complete initial coding. In the next stage, the second and third researchers did the verification of the codes and selected themes. The primary researcher prepared the coding sheets that summarized the generalized explanation related to women's experiences. A reasonable discussion helped the researchers to find the connections between categories. Finally, we selected and represented the most relevant comments/opinions of the respondents (content) that closely related to the central themes and reflected the main objectives of the study (Leedy and Ormrod, 2001).

Issues of reflexivity

The researchers carefully observed data collection and analysis processes. The researchers noted the nature of obstacles during the data collection and analysis process. During this phase, several debriefing sessions were held to discuss the issues of reflexivity and associated problems while collecting and analyzing the data. These sessions helped the researcher to adopt suitable strategies to handle such challenges (Table 1).

Qualitative findings

Social and cultural context

The majority of the members shared their views on the social and cultural constraints faced by them in different situations. According to the responses, social perceptions about women's roles have a strong influence on their professional demands. For example, public dealing is always difficult for them in their cultural setup where women's presence in public space is taken always an odd phenomenon. However, they have to deal with these situations to make their space in this field. The members shared that women face discrimination in parties due to the norms and cultural practices about women's roles, interaction patterns and household responsibilities. Politics as a profession has different professional norms where women have to be socially more interactive, bold and courageous. The norms of this profession challenge the expected cultural norms for women and restrict women's interaction and communication patterns. This can be illustrated by the following statements of the respondents:

In our cultural set up it is always a challenging situation for those women who step outside the realm of homes. The outside (public) realm belongs to a male and this realm has its psyche, standards, and norms to check good or bad behavior which is always reflected in male attitude (member, MC).

I have to be extra conscious in public gatherings due to the negative public attitude. We cannot ask or stop anyone from continuous gazing or passing annoying gestures. It is always difficult to manage the situation when continuous observation by someone makes you center of the attention of everyone. I always prefer to take my male family members to attend these gatherings (member, PPP).

According to the majority of the responses, due to these negative societal perceptions and attitudes toward women's presence in the public space, families discourage women's participation in politics and do not allow them to join such professions where their respect can

Table 1.
Profile of the
respondents

<i>Age in years</i>	
30-39	8
40-49	8
50-59	9
<i>Education</i>	
Metric	3
BA	8
Master	10
MPhil	04
<i>Party affiliation</i>	
Pakistan People's Party	07
Pakistan Muslim League (N)	08
Muslim Conference (AJK)	10
<i>Positions within the parties</i>	
Central executive committee	13
City president	04
District president	03
Member legislative assembly	05

easily be questioned. The responses show that these circumstances have serious implications for women's decision to professionally choose this field that ultimately result in their lower involvement in this profession. As shared by one of the members:

In our society, it is not easy for women to make space in politics. Socially it is a less appreciated field. When I decided to join this profession, first, I analyzed my place/status in the family and society. Then I realized that how could I work within the existing social structure of our society. That's why in the first stage of my career, I always took my brother with me for so many reasons (member, PPP).

The responses also highlighted work–life balance and household responsibilities as the main hurdles that affect women's priorities and place politics as a second or third priority. Respondents shared that it was quite challenging to carry a political life with very young children. Some shared that they joined politics when they were almost free from motherhood responsibility. According to one member:

As a political worker, time for my family remains the biggest challenge for me. The nature of work involves continuous efforts to attend party meetings, frequent traveling, office assignments, and other party matters. Sometimes, it creates stress and tension but I have to manage it. It is a big sacrifice for me to manage my family time with my political commitment (member, MC).

However, few members did not consider these societal attitudes, women's mobility and work – life balance as significant factors for confining women's participation in politics. According to them, women's personal preferences, political interest and motivation are important factors for their effective political representation at different levels.

Party management and challenges for women members

Regarding the management of the party affairs and candidate's recruitment for party positions, some members of central executive committees and city presidents strongly criticized the process of candidate selection. Members shared that the party does not organize party elections regularly. Women face serious biases due to the absence of formal party elections within their respective parties. Members also shared that the authority of few members within the parties has the power to formulate and carry out their own rules and regulations that severely affect their participation. The absence of party elections and use of informal means make it easy for authorities to manipulate the performance, hard work and repute of party members specifically for those who work hard at grassroots levels to prove themselves as true party members. The absence of party elections negatively influences women members' loyalty and determination for their parties. One member shared:

Yes, I have experienced several biases for party positions at the party level. Parties are always more concerned to create political alliances with different political and social groups to keep up their power and control. In such circumstances, it is always easy for the party to ignore us from keen party positions (member, PPP).

However, there were other women members (district presidents and legislative assembly members) who had different views about the criteria and process of candidate selection. They justified the selection processes within their respective parties. According to them, parties' leadership is more experienced and aware of the internal and external political circumstances, which play a great role to select the most suitable candidates. Moreover, other factors are also taken into consideration for selection besides the candidate's position within the particular area. Party favors to some of the members because of their hard work, loyalty and performance. Sometimes, the party favors a candidate for his/her strong holding in a particular area that is beneficial for the party's interest. As members shared:

Sometimes it seems that selection is not fair when the party ignores any competent member. But we have to focus on the overall interest of the party and external circumstances to select other candidates which may help the party in a particular situation (member, MC).

Party president is always right because he holds a vision, experience and can best decide who is more suitable for the party in different situations and times (member, PPP).

Role of client/patronage relations

Regarding the question about the role of biradari, patronage – client relations for party positions and social networks, members highlighted their importance and impact on women’s political participation (Shabbir, 2019). One member (city president) shared her views about the party attitude toward workers who do not have a strong linkage or support to come forward. She told her experience when she started her career as a “zila sadar” (district president) of Mirpur on the platform of the Muslim Conference. It was a tough struggle for her as she felt that many decisions were taken on a personal basis, and party leadership ignored her performance and commitment. She felt discrimination on many occasions where the party refused to acknowledge her role and struggle. This was due to the strong role of caste and biradari, money power and patronage at the party. These circumstances forced her to leave the Muslim Conference. After some time, she joined another party, and now she believes that workers struggle is acknowledged in this party and has a more structured mechanism to check the performance of workers as compared to the Muslim Conference.

Similarly, one member shared her experience about the role of political elites and influential people to select their applicants for the college lecturers’ seats in her area. According to her, she was less authoritative and less influential in providing some benefits to the people of her district. These seats were allocated according to the consent of other influential party members who were very close to the party president. She told that these members got the verbal approval and commitment of the party presidents for the lecturers’ seats before the formal process of the interviews for selection on merit. This experience reflects the importance of familial terms, and strong social networks and ties to have access to multiple benefits.

Women members at city and district level explained that less biradari support and patronage and lack of social capital (women’s capabilities, qualification, knowledge, political will and experience) much influence their status within the parties, and they are not able to assert any political influence at local levels. For them, these are important features of Azad Kashmir’s local political culture where voters are always concerned and support the candidate from whom they can get most political benefits. This social attitude harms the community’s voting attitude toward women as candidates:

It is a fact that our villagers’ support and brings us to the forefront of this political system. Though, they are very conscious to cast their vote only for that candidate who can, in turn, extend favors to them. They are always more critical about the role of the candidate and the possible benefits they can gain from him/her. People cast their votes to support family terms despite having concerns/issues with the selected candidate (member, MC).

The results also revealed that women who hold some positions at the district and city level do not have sound say in the selection processes and other party matters. These members have to accept the decisions as they are taken as their loyalty, sincerity and trust on party leaders. Respondents highlighted their less representation at decision-making positions as the most significant cause of their weaker status in the political processes at the legislative and party level. According to the one response:

I think our positions do not have any significance as we are not able to assert any impact on party decisions. I know we have to face many challenges to discuss or represent our concerns and issues.

We cannot openly criticize or analyze some of our party policies towards women's representation. This situation negatively affects women's representation at the party level (member, PML).

The access to economic resources

Concerning the role of money, power and wealth in party politics, women members showed their serious concerns about how these factors influence their participation at all levels. One member shared that party meetings and party processions work as an opportunity to show the sound impact of financially strong members. This also provides an opportunity for the members to impress party leaders, to get closer and to gain political and personal interests. Similarly, one respondent shared that it is very difficult to make our leaders happy, as we have to give them full protocol that ranges from organizing huge meetings at some expensive places, arranging full lunch/dinner for all party members, publicizing it and most important secret gifts for them on their demands (Shabbir, 2018). "It is tough and I have lost all of my resources to handle all these issues".

Women members also highlighted that women face discrimination about the party funds allocation and other party resources for the proper functioning of the women's wing forum. Some members shared that they did not have specific funds for women's wings in the party and have to use and run the system by their financial resources. A similar stance is shared by one of the respondents:

I am given a separate section under women wing to mobilize young girls. I do not have any administrative and physical infrastructure for this section. I have to arrange and set up a new section all by myself. It is a laborious task especially when someone does not receive any financial help from the party and on the other hand, no one is ready to work voluntarily. It is not only about political commitment and spirit; I think a common worker needs at least a supportive working environment (member, PPP).

Issues of quotas

Regarding the issue of a 10% reservation for women at the legislative level, members shared their views for the increase in specific proportion for women at the party and legislative levels. For them, it was the only way to promote women's effective political representation by providing them more space by allocating specific proportion at major decision-making positions within their parties. As shared by the members:

Women's proportion at a party and the legislative level is the most important issue for us. We have given several recommendations to the party for increasing women's proportion up to 25 per cent at legislative and 40 to 50 per cent at the party level. This increase will have a very positive effect on women.

I think proportion counts a lot. I have experience of participation in party meetings at the executive level. There were more than 1000 male members with only 21 women members in the meeting. Women were just called on to the stage to present a different kind of party resolutions. They did not share their views on different matters except that we as a member agree with all the decisions made by the party president (MC).

However, other members focused on the effectiveness of women's positions and not more proportion at the party and legislative levels. According to them, having more proportion will not have a sound impact on the political representation of women unless their positions are truly recognized and appreciated by the party leaders. Most of the members emphasized for 40% party quotas for women's representation and selection of educated, committed and professionally strong women at important decision-making positions within the parties. For

them, women's membership should not be limited to just increase the numerical strength but to give them a platform, an organized political structure (offices) with full party support (Shabbir, 2015). Interestingly, most of the members were unaware of the current strength of women members in their union councils, city and district levels. It was shared by one respondent that we are always advised to bring 20–30 extra women in meetings from our locality/social circle when the party has to organize a meeting. She further shared that we have to manage the required strength to represent women's presence in our meetings. We know that most of them are unaware of the political processes.

Discussion

The main focus of our paper is to highlight the significant features of the local political system of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, which is practiced at the party and legislative levels. The results show that women's participation is affected by the culture of local political structure and the level of parties institutionalized setup. We found a strong impact on the public and private dichotomy that has a negative influence on women's mobility, career and life choices. Our findings are consistent with several studies on women's participation in public life in Pakistan (Zakar *et al.*, 2018; Bari, 2015a, 2015b). The findings also suggest that gender segregation primarily based on the public and private divide has significant religious and psychological implications for women's participation in the political processes. These religious discourses and strong public and private divide, produce and reinforce gender differences in values, interests and professional choices between men and women. Besides this, we also found that women attach more primacy to motherhood responsibility. Therefore, women find less time for effective political participation due to the burden of professional and household activities.

An analysis of the responses has revealed that money, economic resources and dynastic leadership are the strong features of power in the local political system of Azad Jammu and Kashmir where few get a chance to come forward in the political processes. This dynastic and less institutionalized political setup does not promote common women workers at the grassroots levels. Their participation is severely affected by the political culture where money plays an important role to reach higher positions and statuses are acquired through investing more money in the parties. Women face the serious challenges of financing of organizing political activities and election campaigns. Huge spending of economic resources on election campaign makes it impossible for women to contest elections on the same level. It becomes difficult for them to manage day-to-day operations, to have access to large private funds and donors. The analysis also revealed that the ways members are nominated and selected for party positions create serious constraints for women to come forward in the political processes. Women have to face serious constraints and discrimination due to the lack of biradari support, patronage reference and fewer economical means to come forward in the political processes. Besides this, clientelism (found in these political networks) plays a decisive role to hold a strong place within the party. According to Saher and Mayrhofer (2014), this phenomenon of clientelism is prevalent in the form of "vartan bhanji" at local levels used as a strategy and mechanism to develop the social network and to influence people in Pakistan. Our results are also consistent with earlier studies on the role of biraderi in the political processes in Pakistan that it is the biraderi unity that is considered as a more durable reason for possible candidate nomination and selection than any ideological unity of the political party (Ahmad and Naseem, 2011; Ahmed, 2006; Lyon, 2002).

The studies of Meanwaring and Scully (1995) and Macaulay (2006) highlight a direct link with the degree of centralization or institutionalized setup within the parties and implementation rules and regulations. Our results show a less centralized party system that ignores parties' internal rules and regulations. Women's political participation is strongly

influenced by the political structures and the degree of centralization or institutionalized setup of the parties. Women experience a less supportive social and political environment at the party level, and now, parties do not give full space and support to all women. According to the responses, the informal selection always benefits members close to the leaders and executive committee. This situation provides a chance to the male members of the party to bring women from their families to expand their own circle of political power through control of dominant positions within the parties. Consequently, the gender gap of political representation is filled through electing few women on these positions through quotas system with no real political will and experience. Our results also show the role of hereditary entitlement to get more net support from other members, which becomes a great hindrance for a capable candidate without any hereditary connections. Most political parties are largely family-run political entrepreneurship where leadership is strictly a family matter, and it is passed from one generation to another (Mumtaz, 2005). Women do not have enough representation in the upper stratum of the decision-making positions in their respective parties. Moreover, women's wings within the parties do not have a sound impact to promote women as a candidate.

Conclusion

In this paper, our main purpose is to look at and understand women members' perspectives about the current social and political environment on their political representation at different levels in the Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The context-specific culturally expected norms and gender beliefs related to women's role highlight its significant influence on their involvement and decision to take an active part in politics. In this study, we are concerned with the conventional political activities at local levels, which are traditional, often less-institutionalized and party-related forms of participation (e.g. the selection of decision-making positions, party funding, supporting an election campaign) and unconventional (issue-based participation). This research greatly contributes to our theoretical understanding to fully comprehend the overall social and political status of women and its influences on women's effective political representation at local levels in Azad Jammu and Kashmir; a less-discussed area in the academic research.

The results show that political parties have their own informal rules, norms or practices that exist with the local political setup. There is a lack of formal ways to run party affairs. Moreover, a less-institutionalized setup of parties create challenges for women's political representation at different decision-making positions within their respective parties. Women's responses highlight the influence of powerful people on candidates' selection for different party positions where personal connections and favors not a candidate's performance. The results also show that women members (without having the political family background) lack both access to informal social networks and support of other traditional mediums like *jirga*; therefore, they lagged in the political representation in the existing political system of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Consistently, these women experience direct and indirect discrimination in the form of less representation, the least possibility of promotions and career opportunities at the party level.

There is a lack of party support for women to become an aspirant candidate. Political parties show the unwillingness to join women at the senior and administrative level circle. Additionally, the lack of funding is the most contentious factor faced by women in their respective parties. Parties are mostly funded by wealthy male members, and surely, women cannot compete with their male counterparts. Therefore, women remain powerless within their respective political parties. For a variety of reasons, women are held back or face resistance for party tickets. Mostly, members associated women's marginalized status in politics with their less proportion at the central executive committee within the parties and at the legislative level. Moreover, women do not have enough numerical strength in the

executive committee, which ultimately affects their status and place in the parties. Mostly perspectives of women are not taken into consideration during the nomination and selection processes of candidates' selections for different positions.

Women's perspectives show the ground realities about gender beliefs and their impact on women's involvement in politics as a profession. There is also a need to research how gender beliefs affect women's participation in leadership roles and the party's male member's decisions for women's access to decision-making positions. Further, research is needed to check the perspectives of local leadership about more quotas for women representation at a party and legislative levels. Furthermore, perspectives of the local community on the women's participation in local affairs of their respective areas can be analyzed to fully comprehend the real representation of women in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. This study may serve as a baseline for future researchers to separately analyze the relationship of multiple factors and single-level factors to get a more holistic understanding of the issue.

Notes

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Azad_Kashmir
2. Biradari (brotherhood) is the dominant force in the social and political system of Pakistan, considered as a strong binder in making group alliances and performs a significant role in daily life. According to Eagler (1960:90), "Biraderi is a patrilineage. All the men who can trace their relationship to a common ancestor, no matter how remote, belong to the same biraderi".
3. Vartan bhanji is maintained through various ways in Pakistani culture; generally, it is expressed through exchange of gifts among family/kin-members as well as with non-kin relations to support social networks within the organizations (Khilji, 2003; Saheer and Mayrhofer, 2014) where people get benefits based on their belonging to particular social groups.
4. A tribal council constituted of male members work to settle the local disputes in Afghanistan and Pakistan.
5. Sanskrit word *panch* means five, a village council originally consisted of five members in India and Pakistan.

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