WOMEN IN CONFLICT ZONES: A STUDY OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND GRASSROOTS PEACE BUILDINGS EFFORTS IN THE NEW MERGED TRIBAL DISTRICTS OF KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA (2018 - 2023)
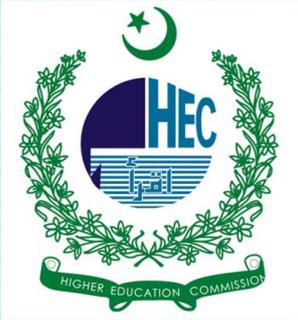
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Abstract

This study explores the evolving role of women in conflict-affected regions, specifically focusing on their political participation and grassroots peace building initiatives in the Newly Merged Tribal Districts (NMTDs) of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa between 2018 and 2023. Following the merger of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the region has undergone significant socio-political transformation, creating both opportunities and challenges for women's engagement in public life. This research investigates how women have navigated deeply patriarchal structures, systemic marginalization, and conflict legacies to assert their agency in political forums and community-based peace processes. Drawing on qualitative data, including interviews with female activists, local leaders, and civil society actors, the study reveals a growing yet fragile presence of women in decision-making and peace building spaces. Despite institutional barriers and cultural resistance, their involvement is shaping new narratives of resilience, democratization, and inclusive governance in the post-conflict reconstruction of the tribal belt. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of gendered peace building in post-merger Pakistan and offer policy insights for promoting women's leadership in fragile and transitional contexts.

Keywords: Women in conflict zones, political participation, grassroots peace building, tribal districts, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, post-merger governance, gender and conflict, inclusive development, women's empowerment, FATA reforms.

Introduction

The role of women in conflict zones has gained global attention due to the recognition that sustainable peace and inclusive governance cannot be achieved without the meaningful participation of women. Across the world, women have increasingly emerged as vital agents of change in post-conflict societies, often leading grassroots initiatives, advocating for human rights, and contributing to peace building efforts. Despite being among the most affected by conflict, women are frequently excluded from formal political processes and post-conflict reconstruction efforts. This exclusion not only undermines gender equality but also hampers the sustainability of

peace and democratic governance (United Nations, 2015).

In the context of Pakistan, the Newly Merged Tribal Districts (NMTDs) of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa formerly the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) have been the epicenter of prolonged conflict, extremism, and socio-political instability. Following the 25th Constitutional Amendment in 2018, FATA was merged into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, opening new avenues for integration, development, and democratic participation. However, the legacy of tribal governance, conservative cultural norms, and limited access to education and political platforms continue to restrict women's participation in the region. Women in the NMTDs face structural barriers that are deeply embedded in both the socio-political fabric and historical marginalization of the area (Yusuf, 2018).

This study investigates the political engagement and grassroots peace building efforts of women in the NMTDs from 2018 to 2023, a critical transition period marked by both opportunities and resistance. By employing qualitative methodologies, including interviews, focus group discussions, and case studies of local female leaders, the research seeks to document how women have mobilized at the community level to influence decision-making, challenge patriarchal norms, and promote peace in a fragile security environment. This inquiry is significant not only for understanding gender dynamics in a post-merger context but also for shaping policy recommendations that ensure inclusive governance and conflict resolution (Khan, 2020).

Ultimately, the study contributes to the broader discourse on gender, conflict, and peace building by centering the voices and experiences of women who have historically been marginalized. Their growing involvement in politics and community activism offers a powerful counter-narrative to male-dominated security and development frameworks. Understanding their contributions is essential not only for justice and equity but also for the long-term stability and democratization of the former tribal belt (Naz, 2021).

Literature Review

The role of women in conflict zones has received growing attention in peace and conflict studies, particularly after the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000, which emphasized the critical role of women in peace

processes and post-conflict reconstruction. Studies across the Global South have consistently demonstrated that women, despite being disproportionately affected by conflict, contribute significantly to conflict resolution, community rebuilding, and the restoration of social cohesion. However, their contributions remain underrepresented in formal peace agreements and political processes. Scholars argue that inclusive peace processes that incorporate women are more likely to be sustainable and effective in preventing the recurrence of violence (Anderlini, 2007).

In South Asia, and particularly in Pakistan, the socio-political landscape presents complex challenges to women's participation in public life. Traditional patriarchy, tribal customs, and religious conservatism have often acted as structural impediments to gender equality. Research on Pakistan's conflict-affected regions such as Swat and FATA has indicated that women have historically been excluded from both political representation and peace building activities, due to entrenched gender norms and lack of institutional support. Nonetheless, several studies have documented the rise of women's civil society initiatives, especially in post-conflict rehabilitation and education sectors, which have laid the foundation for future political activism (Khan & Bano, 2016).

The merger of FATA into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa through the 25th Constitutional Amendment in 2018 opened new political and administrative spaces for marginalized groups, including women. Scholars have debated whether this structural change has translated into real empowerment for women in the region. On one hand, the legal extension of Pakistan's political system to the tribal districts has allowed women to vote, contest local elections, and access state resources. On the other hand, critics argue that without deliberate efforts to dismantle patriarchal tribal codes, the merger risks reinforcing existing inequalities. Yusuf (2019) points out that although the state has expanded formal mechanisms for inclusion, informal practices and local resistance continue to marginalize women.

Further, empirical research from conflict zones in Pakistan highlights that women's political participation is often closely linked to grassroots peace building initiatives. Women-led community dialogues, educational workshops, and informal dispute resolution mechanisms have contributed to local stability in areas such as Khyber, Mohmand, and Orakzai. However, these contributions are rarely

acknowledged by formal institutions. Studies have emphasized the need to institutionalize women's roles in conflict mediation by incorporating them into local governance and justice systems. The absence of such frameworks often leads to the invisibilization of women's peace efforts, despite their transformative impact on community resilience (Rashid, 2020).

Additionally, international literature comparing conflict-affected societies from Rwanda to Afghanistan reinforces the idea that post-conflict periods can act as "windows of opportunity" for altering gender norms. Women in transitional societies often step into leadership roles as traditional power structures collapse. However, these gains are vulnerable to reversal once formal political systems are restored. For Pakistan's tribal districts, the challenge lies in sustaining the political momentum for gender inclusion through policy, education, and sustained civil society engagement (Tripp, 2015).

Problem Statement

Despite significant political reforms and the formal merger of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018, women in the newly merged districts continue to face systemic exclusion from political processes and grassroots peace building efforts. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms, security challenges, and socio-cultural restrictions have severely limited their ability to participate meaningfully in decision-making forums, elections, and reconciliation initiatives. The transitional phase has failed to create inclusive mechanisms that empower women or recognize their potential contributions to peace and stability in conflict-affected areas. As a result, their voices remain largely unheard in shaping the future of their communities. This research seeks to address this gap by exploring the nature, scope, and barriers of women's political participation and their evolving role in grassroots peace building within these post-conflict tribal regions during the period 2018–2023.

Research Objective

1. To explore the role, challenges, and contributions of women in political participation and grassroots peace building in the newly merged tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa during the period 2018–2023.

Research Question

1. What are the key challenges and contributions of women in political participation and grassroots peace building in the newly merged tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa from 2018 to 2023?

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative methodology, focusing on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with women, civil society members, and local leaders in the newly merged tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Participants will be selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance and insight. Secondary data, including reports, policy documents, and media coverage, will complement the primary data. Thematic analysis will be applied to identify key patterns, challenges, and contributions of women in political participation and peace building from 2018 to 2023.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it sheds light on the underexplored role of women in political participation and grassroots peace building in the conflict-affected, newly merged tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. By examining the period after the FATA-KP merger (2018–2023), the research provides critical insights into how women navigate structural barriers, cultural norms, and security challenges while striving for inclusion and representation. The findings will contribute to academic literature, inform gender-sensitive policy formulation, and support local and national efforts to promote inclusive governance and sustainable peace in post-conflict societies.

Socio-Political Landscape of the Newly Merged Districts

The socio-political landscape of the newly merged districts (formerly FATA) is deeply shaped by their colonial legacy, legal exceptionalism, and long-standing marginalization from the mainstream Pakistani state. Governed under the draconian Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) for over a century, these areas lacked constitutional rights, representation in provincial assemblies, and access to regular legal institutions. This structural isolation fostered a parallel governance model rooted in tribal customs, jirgas (tribal councils), and collective punishment, which often reinforced patriarchal and hierarchical power dynamics. The result was a socio-political vacuum, where

state presence was minimal, services were absent, and democratic norms were largely alien. The 25th Constitutional Amendment in 2018 marked a pivotal legal transformation, merging FATA into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and abolishing the FCR, thus laying the foundation for integration into Pakistan's democratic and legal framework (Yousaf, 2019).

Security and Militarization Post-Integration

Following decades of militancy and counterterrorism operations, the newly merged districts continue to exist under a heavy security presence that complicates the civil-military balance in governance. Operations such as Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad successfully dislodged terrorist networks, but they also resulted in mass internal displacement, infrastructure destruction, and human rights concerns. While security has improved, the governance of these areas remains partially militarized, with paramilitary forces exerting control over administrative functions, policing, and movement. This militarization has created a disconnect between citizens and the state, limiting the space for democratic development and civic engagement. In addition, the persistent security-centric approach has hampered the full realization of constitutional rights, particularly for marginalized groups such as women and youth (Shinwari, 2021).

Electoral Reforms and Political Awakening

The integration of the merged districts into the political framework of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has opened new avenues for electoral participation and democratic inclusion. The first-ever provincial elections in 2019 allowed citizens to elect representatives to the KP Assembly, signaling a historic departure from political exclusion. While voter turnout was modest, especially among women due to social constraints and limited political awareness, the elections marked the beginning of a political awakening. However, traditional power structures—tribal elders, local elites, and informal councils continue to dominate political dynamics, often undermining democratic norms. Moreover, the absence of robust local government structures and delayed implementation of development reforms have created public frustration, raising questions about the sincerity and effectiveness of the integration process (International Crisis Group, 2020).

Development Deficits and Civil Society Constraints

Despite promises of massive development under the Ten-Year Development Plan, progress in the merged districts has been slow and uneven. Basic infrastructure such as roads, schools, and healthcare facilities remains underdeveloped, while the judicial system struggles to replace the abolished tribal courts with fully functional formal courts. Civil society organizations, although active, face operational restrictions due to security protocols and suspicion from both state and tribal actors. Women-led initiatives and youth mobilization efforts are further constrained by cultural conservatism and weak institutional support. These challenges highlight a critical development-governance paradox: while the region is now legally integrated, practical empowerment and inclusive governance remain distant goals. The success of the merger ultimately depends not just on constitutional change but on effective implementation, political will, and sustained public engagement (Khan & Khan, 2021).

Women's Political Participation (2018–2023)

Between 2018 and 2023, women's political participation in Pakistan particularly in conservative and conflict-affected regions—continued to face deep-rooted structural and cultural barriers. Patriarchal traditions, gender segregation, and control over women's mobility have significantly limited their engagement in political processes, especially in rural and tribal areas. Social stigma around female leadership, lack of awareness, and family restrictions often prevent women from voting or contesting elections. Even where legal provisions such as reserved seats exist, the actual empowerment of female representatives is constrained by male-dominated party structures and limited financial and institutional support. These barriers reflect not just societal attitudes but systemic failures to integrate gender equity into political reforms (Zia & Bari, 2019).

The Role of Reserved Seats and Symbolic Representation

Pakistan has implemented gender quotas at both national and local levels, including reserved seats for women in the National Assembly, provincial assemblies, and local governments. While these measures have increased the numerical presence of women in political institutions, critics argue that much of this representation is symbolic rather than substantive. Many female lawmakers on reserved seats lack independent

political capital and are often nominated through male patronage networks within political parties. As a result, their influence on policymaking, especially on issues affecting women, remains limited. Despite being in office, these women often lack the authority or resources to shape legislation, access development funds, or engage in grassroots outreach, particularly in areas like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan (Jafar, 2021).

Grassroots Political Mobilization and Local Elections

Local government elections held in various provinces between 2018 and 2023 presented new opportunities for women's participation at the grassroots level. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, particularly in the newly merged tribal districts, these elections marked the first formal opportunity for women to contest and vote in local polls. Though participation remained low due to fear, tribal restrictions, and logistical challenges, some women defied norms and emerged as candidates and community organizers. Their participation, even in small numbers, symbolized a shifting political consciousness and the slow emergence of female agency in governance. However, the absence of targeted training, party support, and security arrangements for female candidates continues to discourage meaningful participation at the local level (UNDP, 2022).

Digital Spaces and New Avenues for Political Engagement

With limited access to physical political spaces, women in Pakistan have increasingly turned to digital platforms to express political views, organize campaigns, and influence public opinion. From 2018 to 2023, movements such as Aurat March gained momentum through social media mobilization, allowing women from various backgrounds to raise awareness on issues like gender-based violence, reproductive rights, and political exclusion. For younger, urban women, online activism has become a critical space for political education and civic engagement. However, this virtual participation comes with its own risks, including digital harassment, surveillance, and online threats. Despite these challenges, digital spaces remain a growing platform for women's informal political participation and collective action (Fatima & Zubair, 2020).

Women in Grassroots Peace building

1. Reframing Women's Roles in Post-Conflict Societies

In many post-conflict regions, including Pakistan's newly merged tribal districts, women have often been viewed solely as victims of war and instability. However, this perception overlooks the critical and complex roles women play in grassroots peace building. Women often act as informal mediators within families, tribes, and communities, helping to de-escalate tensions and resolve disputes without formal recognition. Their embeddedness in social structures and ability to navigate cultural sensitivities allow them to influence both public and private spheres of conflict resolution. In contexts where male leadership is compromised or distrusted due to prolonged violence or political manipulation, women frequently step in to restore social cohesion and rebuild communal trust. These contributions are often invisible in state-led peace processes, yet they form the bedrock of sustainable, community-based peace efforts (Paffenholz et al., 2016).

2. Cultural Limitations and Agency within Boundaries

Women in tribal and conservative societies, such as the ex-FATA regions of Pakistan, face significant cultural limitations that restrict their overt political engagement. However, within these constraints, women have carved out roles in peace building that are both strategic and contextually rooted. For instance, women-led community forums, madrasa-based dialogue groups, and mother's circles have emerged as safe platforms where issues of violence, radicalization, and reconciliation can be discussed without provoking traditional backlash. These activities often operate under the guise of social or religious gatherings but are in fact subtle forms of peace work. Even in environments where public activism is discouraged, women manage to assert moral authority and mobilize collective action, especially when the issues concern family survival, education, or safety. This layered form of activism is vital for initiating early warning systems and promoting tolerance from the ground up (Shaheed, 2019).

3. Intersection of Gender and Security in Peace building

The intersection of gender and security is particularly relevant in grassroots peace building, where women not only advocate for demilitarization but also address the root causes of conflict, including poverty, injustice, and exclusion. Women's peace building initiatives tend to prioritize reconciliation, education, and health sectors that

contribute to human security far beyond the cessation of violence. In Pakistan, initiatives like community-based education for girls, psycho-social support programs for trauma survivors, and vocational training centers have not only empowered women but also fostered social reintegration for internally displaced persons and ex-combatants. This human-centered approach to peace is often more sustainable than elite-driven negotiations, which may ignore local grievances. Despite their critical role, women remain underrepresented in formal peace processes and local governance structures, limiting the institutionalization of their efforts (Anderlini, 2007).

4. Policy Gaps and the Need for Inclusive Frameworks

One of the major challenges facing women in grassroots peace building is the lack of institutional support, policy frameworks, and financial resources. Government and donor-funded peace programs in Pakistan often focus on male-led civil society organizations or high-level negotiations, neglecting the informal but impactful work of women at the grassroots level. There is also a disconnect between national gender policies and their implementation in conflict-affected regions, where cultural and security constraints override legal provisions. Moreover, the absence of gender-sensitive training for law enforcement, local administrators, and development workers often leads to tokenistic inclusion rather than meaningful engagement. Bridging this gap requires not just more inclusive policies, but also a reimagining of peace building as a shared, gender-balanced effort. Integrating women's experiences and leadership into formal peace and governance systems can enhance legitimacy, accountability, and resilience in post-conflict societies (UN Women, 2020).

Challenges, Opportunities, and Policy Gaps

1. Structural Challenges and Cultural Resistance

One of the foremost challenges to women's political participation and involvement in grassroots peace building in the newly merged tribal districts is the deeply entrenched patriarchal and tribal structure of society. Women in these areas have historically been excluded from formal political systems, legal institutions, and decision-making processes, primarily due to rigid cultural norms that confine them to private spaces. Despite the formal merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018, which extended constitutional rights to the region, implementation of gender-inclusive policies has been slow and ineffective. The absence of gender-sensitive local

governance mechanisms, coupled with low literacy, mobility restrictions, and threats from conservative factions, have created a hostile environment for female participation. Women who attempt to step into public roles often face backlash, social ostracization, or even violence, creating an atmosphere of fear that suppresses political engagement and community leadership (Bari, 2015).

2. Institutional Weaknesses and Policy Incoherence

While Pakistan has made legislative strides—such as gender quotas and protections under the Elections Act of 2017 there remains a serious disconnect between policy and practice, especially in conflict-affected regions. Institutional weaknesses, including under-resourced election commissions, untrained staff, and a lack of gender mainstreaming in local government structures, limit the effectiveness of these reforms. For example, women are often unaware of their political rights due to the absence of voter education campaigns tailored to conservative tribal areas. Moreover, political parties rarely invest in female leadership development or provide financial and logistical support to women candidates. These structural inadequacies are further compounded by poor coordination between federal, provincial, and local authorities, leading to fragmented policy responses and a lack of accountability in gender-sensitive governance (Jafar, 2021).

3. Emerging Opportunities through Local Governance and Digital Platforms

Despite these challenges, opportunities for meaningful change have begun to emerge, particularly through local government reforms and the rise of digital activism. The establishment of local government structures in KP, including in the merged districts, has created an entry point for grassroots female leadership. Some women have contested local elections, participated in village councils, or acted as intermediaries in peace building processes breaking decades of political silence. At the same time, digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have allowed women to engage in political dialogue, organize campaigns, and raise awareness beyond the confines of tribal conservatism. These platforms offer relatively safer spaces for advocacy, capacity building, and coalition formation. With appropriate policy interventions such as digital literacy programs, mobile legal aid clinics, and gender-inclusive governance training these developments could be scaled to transform women's roles in public life across the region (Fatima & Zubair, 2020).

4. The Need for Inclusive and Context-Sensitive Policy Frameworks

The persistent gap between legislation and lived realities for women in the newly merged districts underscores the urgent need for inclusive, context-sensitive policy frameworks. National and provincial policymakers must move beyond symbolic inclusion and invest in systemic reforms that acknowledge the socio-political complexity of post-conflict regions. This includes developing gender-responsive budgeting, decentralizing power to local female representatives, and institutionalizing women's roles in peace and reconciliation councils (Jirga reforms). Moreover, there is a pressing need for inter-agency coordination among civil society, government bodies, and international donors to ensure cohesive and sustainable gender interventions. Without embedding women's participation in the foundations of post-conflict recovery and governance, long-term peace and democratic development will remain elusive. Comprehensive monitoring and evaluation mechanisms must also be introduced to assess the impact of gender inclusion strategies on community resilience and political stability (UN Women, 2020).

Conclusion

This study has explored the multifaceted and often under-recognized roles of women in political participation and grassroots peace building within the newly merged tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa from 2018 to 2023. Despite deeply embedded patriarchal traditions, socio-political marginalization, and the aftermath of conflict and insecurity, women in these regions have demonstrated remarkable resilience and agency. They have stepped beyond their traditional roles to become informal peace builders, community mobilizers, and emerging political voices, even within environments that have long resisted their public presence. The merger of FATA into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa promised constitutional rights, representation, and inclusion. Yet, for women, the transition has been uneven caught between progressive legal reforms and regressive social norms. Structural obstacles such as inadequate policy implementation, security restrictions, lack of institutional support, and cultural resistance continue to inhibit women's full participation in the formal political and peace building domains. However, within these constraints, women have carved out unique and impactful spaces whether through local governance, digital platforms, or community mediation that speak to the untapped potential of inclusive peace. This

thesis highlights the urgent need to move beyond tokenism toward genuine gender inclusion in governance and post-conflict recovery. True peace cannot be achieved without the participation of half the population. Therefore, a gender-sensitive policy approach, one that listens to the lived realities of tribal women, invests in their leadership, and dismantles the systemic barriers they face, is not just necessary it is imperative for building a peaceful, democratic, and equitable future for the region. Empowering these women is not merely a matter of rights; it is a strategic necessity for long-term stability and social transformation in one of Pakistan's most historically marginalized regions.

Findings

1. Women contribute significantly to grassroots peace building through informal conflict resolution and community mediation.

2. Women's political participation remains largely symbolic due to patriarchal party structures and lack of real power.

3. Cultural taboos and security challenges severely limit women's engagement in public and political spaces.

4. Digital platforms have emerged as alternative avenues for women's political expression and activism.

5. Gender-blind policy implementation has hindered inclusive development and meaningful female participation post-merger.

Recommendations

1. Ensure women's representation in all tiers of local and provincial governance in the merged districts.

2. Launch civic education programs to increase women's political awareness and voter participation.

3. Provide financial and institutional support to women-led grassroots peace building initiatives.

4. Improve digital literacy and cyber safety for women to enable online political engagement.

5. Integrate gender-sensitive approaches into all post-merger development policies and plans.

6. Train local officials and police in gender sensitivity and inclusive governance

practices.

7. Build partnerships between civil society, media, and religious leaders to promote women's leadership.

8. Establish legal and physical protection mechanisms for women in political and community roles.

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