

REPRESENTATION OF THE UNDERREPRESENTED: ANALYZING WOMEN'S ROLE IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN DISTRICT ABBOTTABAD

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Abstract

Women are largely underrepresented in the political process in Pakistan. Although women's inclusion in local government is a significant step toward gender equality in Pakistan, various socio-economic and political challenges significantly hinder their active political participation. This study examines the role of women councilors in the local government and the challenges they face in actively participating in the local government system in district Abbottabad. Women's role in local government is qualitatively assessed through two interrelated political activities, like control over utilization of development funds and decisions regarding community development programs such as infrastructure projects.

street pavement, sanitation, health, and education. For the present study, ten women union councilors are purposefully selected from ten different union councils of Abbottabad district. The selected sample is heterogeneous, with councilors representing different socio-economic, ethnic, and political backgrounds. The study findings reveal that women councilors face many challenges in getting development funds. Thus, they largely remain inactive when it comes to their practical role in the development works. Furthermore, their limited access to development funds significantly hampers development programs, especially those related to women. The study shows that although women are present in the decision-making process, they are rarely considered; thus, they have less influence on community development projects. The study suggests that if women are given equal chances of participation, their role in local governance and decision-making can bring equitable and sustainable local-level development.

Keywords: Political Participation, Local governance, challenges, Development.

INTRODUCTION

Political participation extends beyond voting and encompasses a range of activities, including the right to run for office, engage in political debates, and influence policy decisions. According to the United Nations (2005), political participation includes "the freedom to speak out, assemble, and associate; the ability to take part in the conduct of public affairs; and the opportunity to register as a candidate, to campaign, to be elected, and to hold office at all levels of government." Women's political participation is widely recognized as a crucial step toward gender equality and empowerment, ensuring that they have an active role in shaping policies that directly impact their lives. Jahan (2016) defines female political participation as the ability of women to contribute equally to men at all levels of decision-making processes, advocating for their interests and addressing gender-specific challenges.

Despite international commitments to gender parity in politics, women across the world continue to face structural, social, and institutional barriers to effective participation in governance. Even in democratic systems, deep-rooted patriarchal norms, socio-economic dependencies, and systemic discrimination limit women's ability to engage meaningfully in political processes. In many developing countries, particularly in South Asia, women's political involvement remains constrained due to cultural

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biases, inadequate access to resources, and the dominance of male-centered political institutions (UN Women, 2019).

In Pakistan, where women constitute approximately 48.51% of the population (Federal Bureau of Statistics, 2023), legal provisions exist to promote their political participation. The Constitution of Pakistan explicitly guarantees gender equality through Articles 25, 27, and 34, which emphasize non-discrimination, equal job opportunities, and the state's responsibility to facilitate women's political engagement. However, despite these constitutional assurances, women continue to encounter significant hurdles that limit their political participation, particularly at the local government level (Government of Pakistan, 2012).

Historically, women's representation in governance in Pakistan has been marginal. The introduction of reserved seats for women in various constitutional amendments from 1956 onward provided some opportunities for women's political inclusion, but the proportion of these seats remained low. The Devolution of Power Plan (2000) marked a significant shift by allocating 33% of local government seats to women, aiming to enhance their political engagement at the grassroots level (Chaudhary, 2011). However, numerical representation alone does not translate into substantive participation. Women councilors continue to face systemic barriers, including restricted decision-making power, lack of financial and institutional support, and socio-cultural resistance.

The challenges encountered by women in local government in Pakistan, particularly in Abbottabad, indicates broader social constraints that restrict their political empowerment. Significant barriers include inadequate funding, exclusion from key decision-making forums, and the resilience of male dominance within political structures. The selection of the two domains—control over the utilization of development funds and decisions regarding community development programs—was based on their centrality to local governance and their direct impact on grassroots development outcomes. These domains represent significant pathways for evaluating the actual influence of women representatives beyond symbolic political presence. Development funds are a crucial tool through which elected councilors implement tangible improvements in their communities. Therefore, analyzing how far women councilors access and influence the use

of these funds provides insight into the depth of their political empowerment and the space they occupy in decision-making hierarchies.

The present study examine the role and influence of women councilors in development projects and challenges they face in decision-making regarding community projects at the local government level. Similarly, women councilors' participation in decisions regarding community development initiatives such as road construction, sanitation, health provisions, education, and infrastructure indicates how far women representatives can shape the priorities and needs of their represented areas. These domains are often directly associated with women's traditional roles as caregivers yet decisions about them remain largely dominated by male representatives. By examining these two interconnected areas, the study not only captures the formal responsibilities of women councilors but also uncover the informal barriers that prevent them from exercising authority. This approach enables a deeper understanding of their role as active agents of change and the socio-political barriers they navigate within the local government system.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This research employs a qualitative methodology to explore the factors shaping the political participation and representation of women in local governance in Abbottabad. Through in-depth interviews with women councilors, the study gains insights into their experiences and challenges in the political sphere. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the social, cultural, and institutional obstacles that hinder women's political engagement and participation. Additionally, secondary data from various sources is also incorporated to contextualize and strengthen the analysis. The combination of primary and secondary data ensures a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics influencing women's political representation at the local level.

STUDY AREA

Abbottabad District is split into two Tehsils, namely Abbottabad and Havelian. There are a total of 51 Union Councils in both Tehsils of Abbottabad. According to the 2023 census, the population of District Abbottabad was 1,419,072, with 712,218 males and 706,750 females with average growth rate of 1.82%. The rural population is 1039 104, whilst the urban population is 293967 (Pakistan Population Census, 2023). For the

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present study, ten union councils selected in Abbottabad named Nawan Shehr Urban, Nawan Shehr Dhodiyal, V.C. Salhad 1, Upper Kheyal 1, City-3 Kunj urban city ward No-11, Sheik ul Bandi No 1, Jhangi Banda Qazi 1, Mirpur 1, Mirpur 2, and Mirpur 3, representing a diverse range of experiences within local government. Each UC represented by one female councilor. The selected councils include a mix of urban, semi-urban, and rural areas, ensuring the inclusion of different contextual factors that influence the role of women in local governance. The diversity in council settings provides a comprehensive perspective of the challenges and opportunities that women councilors encounter across various geographic and socio-economic contexts.

SAMPLING TECHNIQUE AND SAMPLE SIZE

For the present study, a purposive sampling technique is utilized to collect data from the selected union councils of Abbottabad. The reason behind this choice is its effectiveness in targeting specific populations that appropriately represent the research goals and context. Which means that the researcher selects respondents purposively that align with the research or data demand (Rai, & Thapa, 2015). For the present study ten women councilors are selected from district Abbottabad.

Table: 1 Respondents' Details

Sr No.	Respondent	Union councils
1	R1	Nawan Shehr Urban
2	R2	Nawan Shehr Dhodiyal
3	R3	Salhad 1
4	R4	Upper Kheyal 1
5	R5	City-3 Kunj urban
6	R6	city ward No-11
7	R7	Sheik ul Bandi No 1
8	R8	Jhangi Banda Qazi 1
9	R9	Mirpur II
10	R10	Mirpur III

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Two primary areas of women councilors' participation in the local government are examined in this section. Firstly, women's role in the allocation and utilization of development funds, and secondly, their involvement in the decision-making process related to community development, and the challenges they face in participation and inclusion in the decision-making process. In the context of Abbottabad, these limitations are particularly evident due to the region's cultural and economic characteristics that further intensify women's political engagement and participation.

WOMEN COUNCILORS: ALLOCATION AND UTILIZATION OF DEVELOPMENT FUNDS

Effective distribution and utilization of development funds are crucial for the success of community development projects. Women councilors have a significant role in ensuring that development funds are allocated and used equitably and efficiently for grassroots welfare. These funds are allocated for various development initiatives such as infrastructure development, healthcare, sanitation, and education-related schemes, which directly impact the quality of life in local communities. Women councilors are well-positioned to advocate for the needs of women and marginalized groups within their communities, ensuring that these needs are reflected in the funding priorities.

At the local level, the process of fund allocation begins when each union council applies, detailing its proposed development projects. These applications are reviewed by the relevant authorities at the district or tehsil level to ensure they align with the broader development goals and legal frameworks. The funds are then allocated to each union council, with priority often given to projects that address urgent community needs such as infrastructure repair, sanitation improvement, and access to health facilities. Women councilors play a significant role in making sure that the projects proposed align with the needs of the local community, especially in areas that may have been overlooked by male counterparts (Alvi et al., 2020).

In theory, once development funds are allocated to Union Councils, women councilors are expected to actively participate in various stages of the process—from overseeing implementation to ensuring proper utilization

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of resources. These responsibilities include monitoring ongoing projects to verify that funds are spent efficiently and for their intended purposes. Women councilors are also expected to advocate for the prioritization of women-centric needs such as healthcare, education, and social welfare in the allocation process. However, in practice, the situation on the ground is markedly different. Through the in-depth interviews conducted with women councilors in Abbottabad, it became evident that the most persistent and widespread challenge at the grassroots level is the irregular and insufficient provision of development funds by district-level authorities. Many councilors reported that delays, lack of transparency, and bureaucratic hurdles significantly limit their ability to implement or monitor development initiatives effectively. In several cases, women councilors expressed frustration over being excluded from key budgetary decisions, and even when funds were allocated, they were either minimal or disbursed too late to be impactful. Despite these barriers, women councilors continue to push for greater accountability and advocate for equitable distribution of resources, yet their influence remains constrained due to systemic inefficiencies and male-dominated local governance structures. Through the in-depth interviews conducted with women councilors in Abbottabad, it became evident that at the grassroots level, the most persistent and widespread challenge is the irregular and insufficient provision of development funds by the government. Most of the respondents emphasized that their capacity to contribute meaningfully to local development is severely restricted by the lack of financial support. Many women councilors shared that the core issue lies not in the lack of willingness or planning on their part, but because of the unavailability of funds from the provincial government. They stated that although councilors are expected to deliver development and welfare projects in their respective areas, they are rarely provided with the necessary financial resources to do so. For example, one woman respondent from UC-Mirpur 1 stated, "when the government itself does not have sufficient funds, it becomes nearly impossible to carry out development projects effectively. Moreover, there is a noticeable disparity in resource allocation, as male councilors, especially chairmen, are prioritized over women when it comes to funds and project approvals." A significant insight that emerged through interviews was the availability of

funds in the past. Councilors with previous experience of being councilors recalled that they had previously had access to funds. In the past whenever they submitted development proposals, they received funds to execute community development projects like sanitation, health, and education projects. However, they have a shortage of development funds. Several respondents directly linked this issue to the frequent changes in government setup, stating that every new government either delays fund distribution or withholds it for unknown time periods, which hinders the implementation of local projects. Another woman councilor from UC-Nawan Shehr Dhodial said, “during my previous term as a counselor, we used to receive government funds on time and were able to get work done. Now, with every new government, the whole system comes to a halt, no funds are released, and no one listens to us.”

This inconsistency reflects systemic limitations that not only disrupt governance but also disproportionately impact women representatives, limiting their ability to deliver tangible outcomes for their communities. Women councilors who are selected for the first time to office expressed frustration over the lack of transparency and favoritism in the allocation of funds. One woman mentioned that she had submitted a proposal for a health-related project aimed at setting up a small clinic in an underserved area. Despite the urgent community need, her proposal was sidelined, and funds were instead granted to a male councilor for a road construction project, an initiative she believed was unnecessary at that time. She added, “funds were shifted to another development project of a male union councilor who was male and more influential despite his project not being necessary.” In a similar context another woman councilor added, “It felt as though my efforts were invisible. The chairman favored projects presented by male members, even though I had a strong case backed by community needs but not considered” (UC-Jhangi Banda Qazi). These narrations illustrate the deeply rooted gender inequalities and biasness in fund allocation, where women’s initiatives, even more community-centric and essential, are overlooked.

Several respondents raised concerns about the absence of professional training and clearly defined roles for women in local governments. One councilor from UC-Sheikul Bandi remarked, “the government hasn’t outlined our responsibilities properly. We are left with vague guidelines,

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making it difficult to function effectively. Even our protests and demands for funds have been met with indifference.” This lack of support restricts women’s capacity to lead effectively, emphasizing the need for structured training programs and policy reforms to enhance their contribution to governance. The findings show that role ambiguity significantly hampers women’s ability to navigate institutional spaces, leaving them vulnerable to exclusion.

In some cases, the absence of funds is coupled with an apparent disregard for the contributions of women representatives. One councilor explained, “despite conducting several protests demanding clarity on our roles and resource allocation, the government continues to ignore our concerns. This indifference reflects a larger institutional failure to support women in governance.” (UC-Nawan Shehr Urban). Without addressing these systemic gaps, women representatives remain trapped in a cycle of marginalization, unable to break institutional biases and barriers.

To address these challenges, there is an urgent need for systemic reforms aimed at fostering inclusivity, transparency, and accountability within local government structures. One respondent concluded, “without structural changes, women representatives will continue to face barriers that limit their effectiveness. We need clear guidelines, equitable resource allocation, and an end to discriminatory practices (UC-Mirpur III). Empowering women in governance requires dismantling patriarchal norms within institutions and fostering an environment where their voices are valued and respected. By deflecting accountability onto women, the government not only perpetuates stereotypes but also disregards the structural flaws that hinder progress. As the councilor rightly emphasized, “nations don’t progress by blaming gender; they move forward when the system supports everyone equally.” (UC-Salhad I). This critique reveals the urgent need for a more transparent and equitable resource distribution framework to ensure that development initiatives are not derailed by governmental shortcomings.

These narratives collectively highlight how the lack of consistent funding, coupled with gender bias and political instability, creates a systemic obstacle that severely limits the capacity of women councilors to play an effective role in local governance and development.

WOMEN COUNCILORS' ROLE IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

At the local level, community development initiatives play a vital role in shaping the quality of life for residents. From building roads and schools to managing sanitation and healthcare services, these initiatives directly affect people's daily lives. While national-level policies set broad goals, true progress begins at the grassroots level, where the needs are most urgent and solutions most impactful. When local governance functions effectively, it lays a strong foundation for national development. However, the ground realities often tell a different story.

The study addresses questions like, do women councilors have a real say in these community decisions? Are their voices truly heard when it comes to planning and executing development programs? These are not just abstract concerns—these are questions that reflect the everyday struggles and limitations many women councilors face. The study findings reveal diverse stories, experiences, and challenges that women representatives in Abbottabad encounter in the decision-making process.

Councilors who had served a second term were generally more confident and experienced in participating in development initiatives. One second-term woman councilor shared, “our village faced severe flooding during the rainy season. I collaborated with council members to initiate a drainage project. Though funding was a hurdle, I convinced donors by presenting data and community feedback, ensuring the project was approved and executed.”

Another second-term councilor said, “in one case, a road construction project was halted due to disagreements. I acted as a mediator, engaging with all stakeholders and proposing a compromise that satisfied everyone. The project resumed and was completed within the year (UC-Nawan Shehr Dhodial).

The narrations show how women play an important role in community development and decision-making if given opportunities. However, the level of women's involvement is not consistent across the board. A major issue is unequal representation and participation of women in different union councils. Local culture norms, attitudes, and support from male members are very important in this context. For example, some women are not even informed about meetings, and decisions are mainly made by male members of the union council.

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In this regard, one female councilor said, "decision-making? We're not even told when the meetings will be held. If we aren't in the room, how can we make any decisions?" This reveals the deeply rooted gender differences that largely undermine women's participation in the development processes. One of the councilors said that she rarely attends council meetings, which naturally limits her ability to be involved in any decision-making processes. Her limited participation could be the result of various factors, such as lack of timely information about meetings, logistical difficulties, or even a sense of exclusion from the council's core functioning. Her absence from decision-making processes not only sidelines her from important discussions but also reflects a deeper issue—when women are not actively included or encouraged to participate. As she shared, "I rarely attend council meetings, so I haven't had much of a role in decision-making." (UC-Kunj). This shows how systemic disengagement excludes women councilors. Another councilor mentioned that no meaningful development projects have taken place in her area yet; this is because she hasn't had the opportunity to be part of any development projects and decisions. This shows the issue of how local development is prioritized, planned, and executed. Some areas get continuous attention, while others are left behind, limiting the participation of women representatives from those regions.

One woman explained, "no significant projects requiring decision-making have come up in my area so far." (UC-Mirpur III). This kind of inactivity not only discourages women councilors but also reflects poor planning and a lack of inclusivity in decision-making at the local level. In a similar situation a woman councilor shared her frustration over the construction of a road in her union council, where she wasn't even informed about it. Upon contacting the union council chairman, he said that the development project was needed, so we started it. It does not matter whether you are contacted or not; the development is there, and you need to be happy about it. This clearly reflects how women are often excluded from key conversations and decisions, even when the development is happening right in their union council. In such conditions, it becomes impossible for them to exercise their role as decision-makers. These examples highlight the reality that without inclusion, transparency, and respect for their role, meaningful participation in decision-making remains out of reach for many women

representatives.

CHALLENGES TO WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES IN THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Although women's participation in local governance structures has improved in recent years through reserved seats, their presence often remains symbolic rather than substantive. The most significant barriers women councilors face in Abbottabad stem from gender inequality and deep-rooted cultural norms that continue to define political spaces as male-dominated.

The most prominent challenge is gender inequality within decision-making processes. Even when women hold official titles, they are often excluded from meaningful participation in council activities. In many cases, male members dominate discussions and decisions without consulting their female counterparts. As one councilor stated, "I am invited to meetings, but I am rarely asked for my opinion or given any role in decisions" (UC-Kunj). This reflects a broader structural issue where women are present in councils but not empowered to act. Women are also not entrusted with authority over financial matters, especially development funds. Their male colleagues or chairpersons often allocate resources without involving them. A woman councilor from UC- Nawan Shehr Dhodial said, "the chairman initiated a road construction project in my area, but I was not informed. When I asked, he said he had done it on his own," shared one female councilor." This undermines women's credibility and prevents them from exercising their mandate effectively. Additionally, many women councilors lack access to capacity-building programs that could help them navigate technical aspects of governance, such as budgeting, planning, or monitoring development projects. This knowledge gap contributes to their dependency and limits their participation.

Beyond institutional barriers, cultural norms in Abbottabad present a more visible form of resistance. Politics continues to be viewed as a masculine activity, and women's involvement is often questioned or stigmatized by both male colleagues and society at large. One woman responded, "in our culture, people still believe politics is a man's domain. A woman who tries to speak up or take initiative is seen as crossing her limits." This perception discourages many women from being assertive, fearing backlash or social criticism. These cultural norms also result in

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limited mobility for female representatives. In some cases, families restrict their movement due to concerns about safety, honor, or traditional expectations. "I cannot visit distant areas of my constituency alone. My family insists that a male relative must accompany me, which is not always possible." Additionally, women face a dual burden, expected to fulfill domestic responsibilities while managing their political roles. This workload imbalance reduces their availability and energy regarding community engagement. One woman stated, "even when I attend meetings or work in the field, I return home to cook, clean, and take care of the children" (UC-Salhad 1). Such expectations reinforce the idea that their political role is secondary to their household duties. The challenges faced by women in local government are both systemic and social. Gender inequality within governance structures, coupled with cultural norms that restrict women's public roles, severely limit their influence and effectiveness. Addressing these issues requires not only policy-level changes and institutional support but also societal transformation redefining gender roles and normalizing women's leadership in political spaces.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the critical yet often overlooked role of women councilors in the local governance of District Abbottabad. Despite formal inclusion in the local government structure, women's effective participation remains constrained by persistent socio-cultural norms, limited access to development funds, and male-dominated decision-making. The findings indicate that while women councilors contribute significantly to community development programs, particularly in sectors like health, education, sanitation, and infrastructure, their influence is curtailed by structural barriers and resource limitations.

Through in-depth interviews, it became evident that women experience exclusion not just in policy formulation but also in the actual allocation and monitoring of development funds. Their political agency is often diminished by entrenched patriarchal attitudes and procedural gaps in the local government system. Yet, despite these challenges, women councilors continue to demonstrate dedication to community welfare and act as crucial actors in grassroots development.

The study also reveals that many women face symbolic participation,

holding formal roles but lacking actual influence in council meetings and decisions. Societal norms limit their mobility and discourage assertiveness, while domestic workloads burden them with overlapping responsibilities that hinder their availability for public roles. Additionally, gaps in capacity-building and social mistrust toward women leadership weaken their effectiveness. Despite these institutional and socio-cultural barriers, the voices of women councilors reflect resilience and a clear commitment to serving their communities.

To move toward a more equitable local governance structure, it is imperative to go beyond symbolic inclusion. There must be institutional reforms that enhance the decision-making authority, financial access, and political visibility of women councilors. Empowering women at the local level is not just a move toward gender equality but also a pathway to inclusive and sustainable community development.



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