UNDERSTANDING BARRIERS TO MARGINALIZED WOMEN'S DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE POLICY DOCUMENTS THROUGH AN INTERSECTIONAL LENS

Aqdas Khanam

Lecturer, Government College for Women University Faisalabad.

Khadija Yousaf

Lecturer, The University of Faisalabad, Pakistan.

Rabia Khan[*]

Assistant Professor, The University of Faisalabad, Pakistan, rabia.khan.ENG@tuf.edu.pk

* Corresponding Author

Abstract:

Regardless of the democratic development, marginalized women go on facing considerable barriers to inclusive democratic process. The present research is a qualitative study seeking to analyze the policy documents to explore intersectional barriers impeding marginalized women's participation in democratic roles. The study engages in thematic and discourse analysis to expose how instead of policies and conceptual frameworks, a perpetual exclusion of women is maintained, thereby ensuring economic disparity, continued othering and gender-based violence. These underrepresented women together with the women from low income groups, and ethnic or racial subgroups, suffer compounded challenges such as restrictions to quality education and healthcare facilities, economic disparities, continued exploitation in cultural and social practices, and above all, non-representation in decision making. The findings of the research emphasize the intricate underplay of identity, power struggle and democratic involvement, accentuating the necessity of inclusive reforms in policy making and true implementation of these policies. The study initiates guiding interventions to promote women empowerment in democratic quarters, advocating reformative policies that intersectional obstructions and promote equitable participation.

Key words: Democratic inclusion, intersectional barriers, marginalized women, equitable participation, discourse analysis.

1. Introduction

The concept of democracy has gone through momentous transformations over-time and numerous attempts have been targeted to promote inclusive and equitable women participation (Carothers, 2016). Notwithstanding these progressions, the marginalized women face substantial barriers and challenges to expressive inclusion in democratic practices (Leigh et al, 2022). These barriers are further exacerbated when coupled with class, ethnicity and race etc. further marginalizing the female voices, leaving them invisible in public discourse and policy making. However, equitable and sustainable development demands inclusive democratic engagement to ensure democratic and social justice. According to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (UN), specifically goal 5 (Gender Equality) and goal 16 (Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions), underscore the need for

women's involvement in public life. Conversely, the experiences of marginalized women remain marginalized when it comes to democratic discourse. Studies have pointed out that women from variety of contexts counter impediments to participation, encompassing social, economic, cultural and institutionalized discernments (UN Women, 2023). This study investigates the intricate and intersectional barriers to marginalized women's democratic inclusion, focusing on their empowerment in the field for sustainable development.

The research adds significantly to the previous research by addressing the largely ignored paradigm i.e. the intersections and complexities hindering women from participating in democratic quarters. The previous research focuses mainly on singular aspects of relegation of women's roles in terms of race, class, ethnicity or gender, ignoring their intersectional value to the argument. Additionally, the previous research's ontology has chiefly relied on quantitative approaches, superseding the importance of contextual analyses presented by qualitative methods. The present study fills this erstwhile gap bridging the way forward for impactful and inclusive democratic participation by the women folk.

1.1 Significance of the Study

Given the diversity and globalization of the contemporary era, comprehending intersectional barriers to women's democratic engagement becomes crucial for advancing inclusion to ensure sustainable development. Marginalization of women's voices in democracy undercuts the legitimization of the very slogan of democracy, "The government of the people, by the people, for the people" (Lincoln, 1863). It perpetuates a cycle of social injustices and hampers the onward progress towards equitable development. The present study engages with the multifarious relationship among power, identity and democratic inclusion, thereby;

1. Advocating representation of women's voices and their democratic inclusivity.
2. Apprising policies and practices for the redressal of intersectional barriers to inclusive practices.
3. Advancing a nuanced understanding of ostracized women's political experiences.
4. Corroborating equality and social justice for sustainable development.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

1. To scrutinize the depiction of women and the discourse concerning penalized women's democratic roles in the policy documents published during the last couple of decades.
2. To evaluate the efficacy of proposed democratic engagement initiatives in addressing and overruling intersectional barriers.

1.3 Research Questions

1. To what extent do the policy documents from last couple of decades redirect intersectional perspectives on women's marginalization in democratic roles?
2. What outcomes and effects have the existing inclusive democratic engagement initiatives brought for women's democratic engagement?

1.4 Thesis Statement

In Pakistan, marginalized women encounter various challenges and barriers to democratic participation, destabilizing the state's democratic life. In spite of the policy documents and legislative frameworks, these reprimanded women continue to face exclusion from decision making processes on account of inadequacy of policy responses due to intersectional barriers such as race, class and gender etc. Patriarchal oppression, social attitudes, ineffectual execution of existing policies and laws, and limited access to elected bodies and decisive positions, further exacerbate the situation. In this context, there is need of investigation into potential challenges impeding women's participation in democratic roles in Pakistan, advocating reformative measures in policy making for a sustainable future.

2. Literature Review

The world has achieved significant milestone in promoting equality of gender and enabling women to participate in sustainable development, through policy initiatives. Yet the marginalized women suffer intersectional barriers to the participation and representation in major institutions of society such as politics, economy and culture (Crenshaw, 1989; Phillip, 1991). Studies have highlighted limited or no access of women to healthcare and education (UNESCO, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2024). Other Studies explore sexual exploitation and economic disparities (WBG, 2019). Still some other researches find socio-cultural influences perpetuating gender-biased practices (UNFPA, 2020; Ali et al, 2022). Conceptual underpinnings and policy language maintain social exclusion (Krizsan & Lombardo, 2013). This sometimes, stems from gender-agnostic policy formulation, demonstrating little or no consideration for intersectional experiences (Lombardo & Margaert, 2013), and even less consideration for marginalized women's experiences (Verloo, 2007).

Policy formations must include inclusive reforms guaranteeing women empowerment (UN Women, 2020). In effective, inclusive reforms imply understanding of intersectional identities and experiences, gender friendly finance allocation, and enhancing women's inclusion in decision making roles (Hantiz et al, 2023). Scholarly studies have indicated gaps in traditional political theories that fail to address the complex experiences and needs of marginalized groups (Phillip, 1995). Crenshaw's intersectionality theory (1989) provides a framework to understand that intersectional identities yield exclusive experiences for marginalized groups. However, the intersectionality framework remains less studied in academia.

On the other hand, Phillip's political feminist theory (1991) explains the gendered nature of democracy and politics, enabling women to challenge the dominant social and patriarchal norms. Research shows that underrepresentation of women in political positions is also one form of gender disparity (Lovenduski, 2005). The present study also utilizes Phillip's concepts to interpret and analyze the discourse concerning women's exclusion. Silver's social exclusion theory (1994), highlighting the continued social exclusion of women also serves as the philosophical foundation of this study, encapsulating the socio-politico-economic dimensions of exclusion. The scholarly studies employing this framework pinpoint the inequality, poverty and marginalization perpetuated by the exclusion (Atkinson, 1998). The studies acknowledge the multifactorial challenges experienced by marginal women. Despite numerous studies in these areas, there still exist some gaps which need to addressed, such as:

- Limited studies on policy documents through intersectional discourse analysis.
- Lack of consideration of exclusion mechanism in policy making.
- Inadequacy of activism against general representation of women in policy documents, ignoring the exclusive experiences of marginalized women under intersectional identities.

The present research addresses these gaps through a qualitative interpretation of policy documents, investigating intersectional issues and enfranchising the women nation-wide.

3. Research Methodology
3.1 Data Collection and Data Analysis

The research works out the document analysis to inspect the women's status in democratic roles. The design of the research employs analysis of 5 policy documents, selected through purposive sampling, for women's authorization in democratic engagements. These documents include National Policy for Women Empowerment (2018), Protection of Women against Harassment at Workplace Act (2010), The Constitution of Pakistan (1973), The 18th Constitutional Amendment (2010), and Pakistan Vision (2025). Through thematic analysis and qualitative content analysis the study identifies the themes, tone, language and policy agreements related to democratic roles assigned to women. This analysis highlights the legal

frameworks, policy gaps and institutional apparatuses that make or mar women's political engagement. The data is analyzed by applying close reading technique to identify key points of this study. The researcher bias was indispensably practiced in the choice of topic and data collection. However, an objective approach has been kept throughout the analysis. Through an exhaustive policy document analysis, the study offers a thorough comprehension of Pakistani women's participation in democratic roles, with special focus on abridgement of policy gaps and possible improvement in areas demanding attention.

3.2 Theoretical Perspectives

This research is fueled by a metissage of analytical approaches, integrating theoretical perspectives from social exclusion theory, feminist political theory and intersectionality theory. Propounded by Kimberly Crenshaw (1989), the intersectionality theory helps understand the way penalized women's intersecting identities, race, gender and ethnicity, contribute to form their experiences, recognizing that women's experiences can't be properly understood with reference to singular aspects of their identity, rather multiple interconnected factors fuel their engagements in social life. Crenshaw emphasizes, "The intersection of racism and sexism factors into… women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by examining the race or gender dimensions separately."(p. 144). The second theory, feminist political theory was initiated by Anne Phillips (1991), critically examines gender-based power dynamics and patriarchal practices limiting inclusive democratic processes. This theory is particularly concerned to pin point the ways that gender is used to shape political institutions and decision making, excluding women from such practices. The social exclusion theory, as put forward by Hilary Silver (1994), complements the previous theories by investigating the systematic exclusion of marginalized women from decision making processes. This theory recognizes the exclusion mechanism like limited access to education, healthcare & economic opportunities, and democratic equity.

This metissage of analytical approaches becomes suggestive for the mechanisms such as policy frameworks, social behaviors, and institutionalized practices, which interrelate and conspire to perpetuate the intersectional barriers and hinder inclusivity. The independent variable i.e. policy documents and legislative practices, is measured to investigate its impact on marginalized women's participation in democratic roles, while the mediating variables, the intersectional hurdles, patriarchy's power structures and societal elimination, have been inspected for their contribution in shaping outcomes. This conceptual framework is founded on the notion that changes in the policy will impact significantly in eliminating marginalization of women in democratic roles, as well as emphasizing that social norms and behaviors impact institutional practices. In this way the selected theories provide a robust structure for investigating the intersections of ethnicity, race, class and gender in determining marginalized women's role in democratic practices. The research offers a nuanced understanding of how these intersectional barriers interact to perpetuate exclusionary outcomes.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Pakistan has made significant advances to promote women's rights. There is a variety of policy initiatives that have been implemented to facilitate inclusive participation of women in achieving SDGs, yet there is still room to improve and enhance women's participation in this regard. A major issue is the non/less representation of women on local government level, which declined significantly after 2010 (Khan & Naqvi, 2022). For example, women councilors suffer noticeable challenges, which include denial of resource allocation and developmental funds(UN Women, 2021). On the whole the women are faced with various challenges which keep them from participating in political roles. One such example is social attitudes such as gatekeeper behavior and male perceptions within the domestic environment

which influences their political participation (Kayuni & Chikadza, 2016). Another challenge is inadequacy of their representation which was 22% from 2008 to 2013, which saw a decline to 19% in the next government. While, in the current government the women occupy only 20.47% seats of Pakistani Parliament (Statista, 2024). Still another barrier to the inclusion of women in democratic roles is limited access to healthcare facilities, education and economic opportunities. (Manandhar et al, 2018; Cerf, 2023). "The nexus of society, education, the economy and health, is therefore discussed and interrelated to provide perspectives on advancing development and sustainability" (Cerf, 2023). The following sections provide and analysis and discussion on various policy documents to critically evaluate the relevance and suitability of these documents in achieving sustainable development.

4.1 National Policy for Women Empowerment NPWE (2018)

NPWE is an extensive document targeting at women's social empowerment and gender equality in Pakistan. Launched in 2012 and revised in 2018, the policy emphasizes that "Empowerment of women is crucial for achieving for achieving sustainable development, economic growth and inclusive democracy". (Government of Pakistan, 2018, p. 5). The policy acknowledges women's importance for acquiring sustainable growth, economic prosperity and inclusive democracy. Women's participation on decisive position is the primary goal of this policy, guaranteeing "women's equal participation in politics, economy and society" (p. 10). The policy initiates various strategies prioritized to attain this objective. At the pinnacle of such strategies is the education, aiming at increasing girl's enrollment, retention and completion ratio. In this context the policy believes that "education is the key to unlocking women's potential" (p. 15). The second priority is economic empowerment, emphasizing the vocational training, micro-financing and opportunities of entrepreneurship.

Elimination of violence against women is also the focal point of this policy, consolidating Regressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) such as law enforcement agencies (police and law courts) and carceral systems. Another objective of the policy is to bring institutional reforms, aiming to enhance gender mainstreaming, coordination and capacity building. The policy dictates a "zero-tolerance policy towards violence against women and girls" (p. 25).

However, the policy fails to address intersectional identities, overlooking specific issues faced by women from rural backgrounds, minority women and women with disabilities. Crenshaw argues that "the failure to consider intersectionality" may lead to "policies that are insufficiently attentive to the needs of women." (p. 1260). Moreover, there are challenges in the implementation of the goals. In the face of resource inadequacy such as infrastructure, insufficient funding and resource management, effective application is detained by significant challenges. These challenges can be overcome by allocating sufficient budget and international cooperation. Additionally, steps should be taken to improve capacity building through trainings and workshops, is also of vital importance. Moreover, male folk should also be engaged to promote equality of gender by challenging patriarchal norms. In short, if the policy is implemented in true letter and spirit, it can accelerate Pakistan's development.

4.2 Protection of Women against Harassment at Workplace Act (2010)

This act is the custodian of women's rights at workplace and safeguards women from various sorts of exploitation, with special focus on harassment. According to Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (1980) harassment is defined as "any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favor or other verbal or non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature". The act provides legal recourse and assures a dignified and safe workplace environment for women.

Notwithstanding its strict and zero tolerance policy for harassment, the act faces challenges towards its implementation. Patriarchal supremacy: male entitlement, sexism, paternalism, and victim-blaming; and, social norms: gender roles, stereotypes, power dynamics and reification of women, perpetuate harassment. Particularly women belonging to rural areas and

marginalized groups (low-income background, ethnic minorities and disabilities), owing to lack of resources, awareness and institutional support have limited or no access to justice mechanism. Also the implementation of law in true letter and spirit also remains largely questionable as Fraser comments, "a culturally insensitive law is likely to be un- or under-implemented and therefore unsuccessful in protecting rights." (2019). Marginalized women suffer other challenges too such as ignorance of their rights, fear of social stigmas/reputational loss, familial and community pressures, forcing them to remain silent. Furthermore, the act works in a formal workplace and ignores the informal setting where many a marginalized woman works. Impactful enactment of the act demands addressing these societal and structural issues through:

- Increased number of awareness campaigns, educating women what their rights are and what legal resources are available.
- Capacity building (to respond, investigate and take preventive measures), enabling the judicial officials and law enforcement agencies work efficiently.
- Set up of special braches dealing with reporting and investigation of harassment cases.

These measures can be helpful in strengthening the institutions and challenging the patriarchal practices, ultimately leading to the true implementation and eventual safety and security of the women at workplace.

4.3 The Constitution of Pakistan (1973)

The Constitution of Pakistan (1973) is a holistic document that encompasses every aspect of state life. It is also the custodian of women's rights, including freedom of speech and equality before the law. The constitution asserts that women enjoy equal rights as men and should not be treated discriminatingly based on their sex. Especially article 25(2) of the CP, considering the importance of women in country's decision making process, reserves seats for women in provincial and national assemblies. The article goes on stressing that women have to be treated equal under the law and no discrimination would be practiced against them. Women are also free to take part in public discourse, expressing their opinions and points of views. According to article 9 women have the equal right to liberty and life. They are also given the right of fair trial, certifying their equality before the law.

 Despite all the constitutional assertions, women continue to suffer institutional biases and patriarchal norm, hindering their effective participation for the country's sustainable development. They are faced with certain challenges to exercise their rights, calling for an ongoing process of reforms and continued advocacy. The law also fails to address the challenges suffered by the marginalized women, ignoring that the experiences of less-advantaged women are different from the ones who have access to mainstream culture. They suffer exclusion from country's development as well as their own well-being, an exclusion which Silver (1995) advocates "can be structural, institutional, or relational, and can operate at various levels, from local to global". Hence, the marginalized women's issues should not only be addressed separately from the mainstream women but also with respect to intersectional identities, as Crenshaw (1989, p. 147) argues, "If any consideration is not given to the intersectional identities of women, policies aimed at empowering women may inadvertently marginalize certain groups of women."

4.4 The 18th Constitutional Amendment (2010)

The 18th amendment was revolutionary step toward a new Pakistan, transferring maximum powers from federation to provincial governments which potentially paved the way for increased influence and participation of women in local governments. The amendment seems to be confirming to Phillip's point of view: "Women's experiences and perspectives must be integrated into policy-making f we are to achieve true equality". (1991) However, the

provincial governments have been slow in implementing effective policies regarding gender issues. Institutional barriers also hinder effective application due to lack of resources and capacity. Social behavior and cultural practices add fuel to fire by putting restraints to women's public life. Also lack of awareness among women about their rights and provisions of the amendment are equally responsible for ineffective implementation of the law.

These issues can be resolved by stimulating gender sensitive strategies, institutional capacity building, and raising awareness among women. (Phillip, 1991, p. 12) asserts that "the politics of presence is not just about getting more women into politics, but about changing the way politics is done." Given the situation, empowering women, as Crenshaw is convinced, adoption of intersectional approach is indispensible. This requires:

- A thorough comprehension of the interaction between identities and it influences the approach to rights and resources.
- Surety that marginalized women's voices are contained within policy discussions and decision making.
- Strategizing specific issues suffered by marginalized women, instead of devising meta-solutions which are not applicable to all groups and every situation.

4.5 Pakistan Vision PV 2025 (2014)

This policy was propelled in 2014 by Planning Commission of Pakistan. It is a practical and comprehensive document envisaging the country's socio-economic development. One of the key visions is women empowerment and the eventual role they play in the country's progress. The policy acknowledges the significance of intersectional barriers to women's inclusive participation in democratic roles and encompasses geological, socio-cultural, economic, ethnic and theological disparities. The document lays stress in three core areas: right to education, economic empowerment and societal protection. Capacity building has been ensured through implementation of law, and strengthening carceral system, institutions and support services to protect against institutional and patriarchal violence and harassment.

However, the document has remained slow towards implementing its policies owing to institutional capacity and inadequate funding. Specifically resource allocation for women's betterment has been insufficient. The challenge is further pronounced due to lack of skills, expertise and capacity towards gender sensitive policies. According to Silver (1994) denying access to opportunities, resources and social services is also called social exclusion as he says, "(It) refers to the process through which individuals" particularly women are driven to "marginalization and exclusion from society". In the light of this argument the social exclusion theory implies the imperativeness of addressing barriers to women's participation in nation's progress as well as their own well-being. Similarly Phillip's Political Feminist Theory (1991) affirms women empowerment through representation and participation in political roles. She lays great emphasis on women's perspectives and experiences to be integrated in policy making processes to ensure equity in society.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The above analysis of the policy documents from the previous decades demonstrates that the state understands the women's role in nation's progress and sustainable development, and is concerned about the true implementation of policy initiatives for the purpose. The state is aligned with Philip's assumption that "the personal is political and political s personal; women's empowerment requires challenging the dominant ideologies and power structure". (1991). However, though the policies are eloquent on the women's inclusion in mainstream progress of the country and their democratic empowerment, it lacks in comprehension of marginalized women's intersectional experiences and do not address these intersectional barriers in appropriate manner. The discussion also highlights the potential barriers towards the participation of women in democratic roles. These barriers include:

- Implementation barriers for want of capacity building and resource allocation.
- Patriarchal attitudes and social norms detaining women's inclusion in democratic and economic roles.
- Detention of rights to education, healthcare and economic opportunities.
- Inadequate or no participation in decision making roles.

These challenges can and must be addressed through a multifaceted approach: strengthening of institutions, healthcare facilities and economic opportunities as policy outcomes; and, awareness campaigns, seminars and workshops as means of fostering equality and social change to achieve SDGs.

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