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Lived Experiences of Women's Political Representatives in District Council Mardan: A Feminist Political Analysis

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Abstract

Women's appearance on the public domain is a popular discourse in the academic circles. Their political experiences on the public domain remain under discussion too. Feminist political analysis as newly emerged perspective is concerned with the political experiences of women. Through feminist critical realism this perspective questions gender construction and its mainstreaming in politics. Drawing on feminist political analysis, this study uncovers women's lived experiences in the district council of Mardan Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. Main concern of the study is to know how the social and cultural practices influence women's lived political experiences in the mentioned area. This study uses interpretive paradigm which guides qualitative methodology. Seventeen women members of the district government were interviewed as sample size. An interview guide was used for conducting in-depth interviews. Theoretical insights for this study come from Kantola and Lombardo's perspective of feminist political analysis. However, gender and political analysis approach of the mentioned perspective is specifically used to analyze the question: that how gender discriminatory social practices, normalized through the use of language, influence women's political experiences. Findings of the study revealed poor political experiences of women members in shape of their misunderstanding of council sessions' agenda, no independence in speech, unattractiveness of their speech, and un-recognition of their participation in the district council.

Key Words: *Feminist Political Analysis, Gender and Political Analysis, Socio-Cultural Structures, Linguistic Practices, Women's Lived Political Experiences.*

Introduction

The discourse of women's appearance on public domain has been a matter of concern among the academic circles. Women's political experiences in the public domain have widely debated across the globe (Coffe and Bolzendahl, 2010; Norris, P., Frank, R. W., & i Coma, F. M., 2014; Barnes, S. H., et. al., 1979). The issue of women's politics and their political experiences is also very common in the south Asian region (Sener, T., 2014; Kassem, F. S., 2012; Tomen, B., 2016) and Pakistan is no exception in this regard (Bilal, M., Ashfaq, U. R., & Akhlaq, M., 2019; Jafar, A., 2005; Reyes, S. L., 2002). However, this study is an attempt to examine women's political experiences through the lenses of feminist political analysis.

Feminist political analysis is a newly emerged perspective in the discourse of gender and politics. This perspective allows feminist political scholars to link theory and praxis on gender political discourses. Feminist political analysis comprised of five different approaches. These approaches are 1) women and political analysis; 2) gender and political analysis; 3) deconstruction and political analysis; 4) intersectionality and political analysis; and 5) post-deconstruction and political analysis (Kantola and Lombardo, 2017).

Women and political analysis focuses women through an analytical approach which analysis women's rights, needs, interests, and their actions. The epistemology of this approach is positivism. Gender and political analysis as another approach of feminist political analysis claims that gender is socially constructed phenomenon under the unequal structures and processes of society. Based on critical realist epistemology this approach asks for how do social structures construct gender and how it is mainstreamed into politics (Kantola and Lombardo, 2017). The deconstruction and political analysis approach of this perspective expresses that discursive practices construct gender reality which are informed by power relations. Based on constructionist epistemology, deconstruction of gender argues for challenging the philosophies of biological determinism and cultural essentialism about gender construction. Intersectionality and political analysis as another key approach of feminist political analysis deals with inequalities, dominations and marginalization that are produced by the complex intersections of gender, power, class, race and other systems of oppression. This approach is based on multiple epistemologies of positivism, constructivism and de-constructivism which enlightens us about the complex realities of gender and power relations. The approach of post-deconstruction and political analysis of this perspective focuses on the materiality of body and emotions that is doing gender in politics which has previously ignored by the deconstruction of discursive practices. Post-deconstruction and political analysis mainly focuses to know how the social and material combination of emotions affects gender politics. The effect of socio-economic and bodily material on power inequalities is central to the post-deconstruction and political analysis (Kantola & Lombardo, 2017).

In this article, I use gender and political analysis approach under the broader umbrella of doing feminist political analysis. Using a critical realist epistemology, I question the imbalance social and cultural structures for gender socialization and its influence on women's political experiences at the district council level. Women due to discriminatory socio-cultural structures face barriers to their political orientation across the globe.

Literature and Theoretical Underpinnings

The development of human agency is an important process for the political candidacy of both the genders (women and men). The structure-agency debate is very common in the academia (Henslin, J. M., & Nelson, A., 2000). Social structure always remains very powerful in terms of the human's socialization and their agency development. Building a political candidacy is also comes under the same umbrella of human socialization where socio-cultural structures play very important role (Nzomo, 1994).

The key theoretical insight comes for this study form the broader umbrella of feminist political analysis given by Kantola and Lombardo. However, I specifically engage gender and political analysis approach of this perspective. This approach approaches gender through critical realist epistemology which argues that the deeper gender structures are socially constructed and understood real by the discursive practices (Kantola and Lombardo, 2017). It further claims that the inequalities are structured and normalized by the use of language which discriminate women's basic orientation. An insight from Kantola and Lombardo's work empower me to know the discriminatory picture of social structures in terms of gender socialization and how they are normalized through the use of language. I particularly focused here to know how the inequalities are structured and normalized through linguistic practices which ultimately affect women's agency and their political experiences.

Methodology

Using feminist political analysis approach in this study I have examined women's political experiences in the district council of Mardan. The researcher used qualitative methodology and relevant research tools. The logic behind the selection of the mentioned methodology and research tools was to ensure objectivity that further strengthens the research standards. Fulfilling prerequisites, the researcher interviewed 17 female members of the district council.

An interview guide comprised of some basic questions about women's political experiences was used for data collection. Major questions in the interview guide were about women's understanding of session's agenda, their independence in speech, men member's attention to female speech, women presence in the sub committees of the council, and recognition of women's participation in the district council. After collection of data the same was transcribed in to text form. The data was then visited time and again for getting familiarity with. Some major themes were extracted from the data and analyzed through thematic analysis protocol. Some categories were developed under the major themes. These categories were developed in line with the main concern of the study. Differences of opinions and similarities of the respondents are presented below in the discussion and findings.

Discussion and Findings

The previous discussion revealed that how the study was conducted while the next one is comprised of primary data collected from women political representatives, empirical and theoretical reviews. First, it discusses all of the blend responses, data trends about women's poor political experiences and socio-cultural reasons behind these experiences and then the discussion is followed by the each lived poor political experience that women members have been through in the district council.

A Mixed Discussion of Poor versus Rich Women's Political Experiences

Maximum number of the respondents declares themselves having poor political experiences because they were uneducated, were not able to understand sessions' agenda, were unable to speak independently, and they were not participating actively in the district councils' sessions. They expressed that we cannot perform like men members because most of our women members are uneducated, we have not been taught about politics by our families, people say that politics is a men game, we have been socialized for domestic business, females are weak and politics need strong nervous. Moreover, a very nominal quantity of women representatives revealed some rich political experiences mean i.e. they were of the opinion that we actively participate in council meetings, speak independently, and contributing in other activities of the council. It is pertinent to mention here that this minor number of women, who had rich political experiences, was educated. However, most of the participants described their political experiences as poor in the district government. How such participants explained their poor political experiences are discussed below with the help of secondary data for drawing conclusion of the study.

Misunderstanding the Agenda of the Council's Business

A dominant number of the selected respondents declare themselves as unable of understanding the agenda of the council's sessions. They revealed that due to their uneducated status, they were not capable of reading and understanding agenda of the meeting. In most of the meetings they took support of men members to explain points in the session agenda. One of the respondents stated that:

"In every session of the district council, it was impossible for me to understand the agenda because I am an uneducated woman. I then either request to the men members to get me understand of the agenda points or remain silent in the whole session. It was very strange for me to remain silent. The men members often became anguished on me that it is not our responsibility to make you understand of the council business. One day a male member told me that if you can't understand the agenda then do not come to the council session and remain at home for domestic activities". It is pertinent to mention here that there is no qualification condition for women members at the district council's elections and women mostly get membership through quota system.

This is a very poor condition of women's political experiences that they come to the district council through quota with no qualification. Kantola and Lombardo's approach of 'gender and political analysis' under the broader umbrella of feminist political analysis is best justified here because they argue that "women are discriminated of their basic rights by the social and cultural practices of the society and language subsequently normalized these practices in the society (Kantola and Lombardo, 2017).

Women's Independence in Speaking

Feminist Critical realism argues that gender socialization takes place under the discriminatory socio-cultural practices having different standards for women and men and thus language and science legitimize these practices (Al-Hindi, K., 1997). In addition to the women's incapability of women to understand agenda of the council's meetings, most of the women members were also not capable of speaking and expressing their thoughts independently on the floor of the council. Feminist critical realist argument is confirmed here that the study area is a *pakhtun* traditional society where due to cultural obligations women are not allowed to speak and take part in the decisions. This situation mostly prevails in the domestic as well as in the public environment (Daraz, U., Naz, A., & Khan, W., 2014). Due to men dominated environment, women's basic socialization is done very poor and that is also expressed in the public domain because of which they were not able to speak independently in the council meetings. One of the participants expressed her view in the following words:

"I feel nervous when I speak in the council meetings. It's very hard for me to speak in from of men because at my family we do not speak loudly and express our ideas in front of my father and brothers. Whenever there is a decision taken at my home we normally didn't participate in that process. The same I feel here. I am thinking that if I speak out of my mind here, the men members would not be allowing me because I feel here like my family life. I also feel that I have got council membership through quota so expressing my ideas independently may cause my membership.

The influence of social structure on women's orientation is best expressed here that they are socially and culturally bound that's why they have been such kind of poor political experiences while not speaking in the district council meetings. Shambley-Ebron and Karikari (2016) argued that cultural influence remains still very strong on women even in the public domain holding different responsibilities. Women act of not speaking independently in the council meetings confirm the finding of shamble and karikari because it is the influence of their basic socialization that took place under a specific culture where they were not allowed to speak independently.

Women's Speech is Unattractive for Men

Besides not understanding council session's agenda and no independence in speech on the council floor, speech of women members in the council meetings is also unattractive. Speech is an important element in the discourse of politics which makes leadership strong (Schaffner, 1996). However, unfortunately, a quarter of women in the district council remain speechless or if they speak have no impact on men members because they have no political orientation and their political candidacy is not strong. A bulk of the respondents revealed their

experience with the saying that when we speak in the council sessions, men members do not lesson us and saying that we are not supposed to speak because we not fit for politics rather to be at home for carrying home economic. One of the respondents has narrated her experience with saying that:

Whenever I speak on the floor of district council, men members do not lesson me carefully and they comment that you are not speaking on the agenda point, rather you are speaking like common people. I also heard their comments while saying that this is not place you people fit for, you are supposed to be responsible for raring of the children and cooking meal at home. One day a male member told me that women are not be so loud in their voice at the council because men do not like women loudness in their speeches.

Although raising voice in the public offices and other appropriate places is very necessary for women empowerment but women are not encouraged by the public platforms (Campbell, 1993). This is an unfortunate with most of the respondents of this study that one way or the other they got membership in the district council but now they are unable to effectively speak and influence men members and fight for their legal rights.

Women's Participation is Unrecognized

In addition to the previous lived political experiences of women members in the district council, their participation in the council's activities is also remains unorganized. Most of the respondents said that our participation in the council's business is not recognized by the male members. Gender based equal political representation and participation is one of the democratic beauties in the modern set up (Mansbridge, 2009). However, maximum participants of this study were disappointed and saying that on one side we as very limited number got membership in the district council and on other side our participation in the council business is always ignored. One of the female representatives shared her lived experiences in the following words:

I am speaking in the council sessions time and again for some basic women's rights but other members ignore my appeals. I have made some special requests to the Nazim of district council but in vain. We as women members also feel that most of the time men members do not lesson us and also not realize our participation. Although, we are not participating like men that's another poor experience but our minor contribution is also not recognized by the council.

One of the studies regarding women's political empowerment suggests that women should be given equal representation in the government bodies and the participation must be appreciated for their encouragement (Celis, K., Childs, S., Kantola, J., & Krook, M. L., 2008). Unfortunately, the lived experiences of the participants in this study are reported very poor by explaining that our activities and contribution in the council's business are not recognized by the men members. One of the participants said that: *"I have helped and so many aggrieved women though the council funding and when I tried in my speech and wanted to discuss it on the floor of the council, other members didn't pay attention to my this contribution.* This stated report of the respondent clearly reveals that women participation did not get recognition in the mentioned council of district Mardan.

Conclusion

Finalizing the debate of women's lived political experiences in terms of poor and rich at the district council of Mardan, this study concludes that women political representatives have normally gone through poor political experiences because they were misunderstanding the agenda of the council sessions, they were not able to speak independently, their speeches were unattractive, and their participation in the council's business was unrecognized. The overall lived political experiences of women, comprising of the mentioned factors, were found poor. These poor political experiences of women in the mentioned council were mainly caused by the social and cultural practices in the study area which are men-powered and normalized through the use of language.

Socializing women for domestic business, lack of women's education and political orientation, lack of exposure to the public sphere, and having no familial background in politics were the major reasons behind women's poor political experiences. This study recommends some possible solutions for making for women's rich experiences in the domain of politics by involving family, community, and government as well. Female education can be ensured by both the stakeholders i.e. family and government, women's political orientation can be safeguarded, and the general community needs to show positive attitude towards women presence on the public domain.

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