

Coping Strategies of Women Politicians Struggling with Challenges in Quetta City

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Abstract

This paper investigates the phenomenon of women politicians' social capital. It also focuses on the strategies women use to navigate the challenges of a political career. The research was qualitative, and the data were collected through random sampling. An unstructured interview guide was used for data Collection. 30 women politicians from various political parties were interviewed to gain in-depth insight into the phenomenon. The results exposed that women face many challenges like restrictions in political mobility, patriarchal system, gender discrimination and harassment in their political career. However, they use some strategies to overcome these barriers.

Keywords: Social capital, Bonding, Bridging, Shared norms, Reciprocal relationship

Introduction

Political participation of women is globally acknowledged as a key driver of democratic governance, gender equality, and sustainable development (Bano, 2009). In Pakistan, despite constitutional provisions and reserved seats for women, their participation in politics remains limited and fraught with obstacles (Begum, 2023). The province of Quetta, as the capital of Balochistan, faces multiple structural challenges—such as patriarchal norms, tribal influences, economic constraints, and security concerns—that further complicate women's political engagement (Rahim, 2024; Ahmed, 2024).

Women politicians in Quetta operate within a cultural-political environment that imposes distinct pressures: social expectations of gender roles, limited mobility, constrained access to party resources and networks, and heightened safety risks (Khan, 2023). Research on female political actors in Pakistan identifies key barriers: male-dominated party structures, marginalisation in decision-making, resource scarcity for campaigns, and overlapping burdens of domestic obligations (Begum, 2023; Shakil, 2023). These challenges are compounded in Balochistan by geographic remoteness, low female literacy and deeply entrenched social norms (Ahmed, 2024; GroundXero, 2025).

Amid these constraints, women politicians do not simply yield: they develop and deploy coping strategies to survive and (sometimes) thrive in this context. Coping here refers to the conscious or unconscious tactics and responses women use to manage, overcome, or adapt to the challenges of political participation. Understanding these strategies is crucial because they provide insight into how political representation can become more inclusive and into the support mechanisms needed for women's meaningful engagement in governance.

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In the Quetta context, coping strategies may include forming informal networks of female supporters, leveraging reserved seats to gain entry and then building visibility, aligning with male patrons or tribal influencers while subtly advancing women's agendas, using digital media to circumvent mobility constraints, and balancing office duties with family obligations. However, little empirical work has systematically documented these strategies, especially at the local level, nor has it thoroughly explored how these tactics are shaped by Balochistan's particular political and social environment.

This study, therefore, aims to explore: (1) What are the main challenges faced by women politicians in Quetta? (2) What coping strategies do they adopt to manage or overcome these challenges? (3) How effective are these strategies, and what structural supports or impediments influence their success? By illuminating these questions, this research contributes to the broader literature on women's political participation in Pakistan, offers locally grounded insights for Quetta, and identifies potential policy implications for enabling more gender-inclusive governance.

In doing so, the study draws on feminist political theory that emphasises not only the presence of women in political institutions but also their meaningful participation and agency (Ribbani, 2012), and on resilience frameworks that treat coping strategies as dynamic responses to adversity rather than mere passive survival. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: first, a brief literature review; then, the research methodology; followed by results and discussion; and concluding with recommendations and limitations.

Background of the Study

Women's political participation is widely recognised as a cornerstone of inclusive governance, democratic legitimacy, and sustainable socio-political development (Bano, 2009). However, across many developing countries—including Pakistan—the political arena continues to be dominated by patriarchal structures that marginalise women's voices and limit their access to decision-making spaces (Rahim, 2024). Although Pakistan has adopted constitutional measures such as reserved seats for women in national, provincial, and local bodies, the mere presence of women in legislative forums does not guarantee meaningful political influence or empowerment (Begum, 2023). Women politicians often remain symbolically represented, while real power continues to be wielded by male party elites, tribal leaders, and socio-religious networks (Shakil, 2023).

In the specific case of Balochistan, the socio-political landscape is shaped by tribal traditions, conservative gender norms, low levels of female education, and historically weak institutional structures. These factors create additional hurdles for women seeking political office (Ahmed, 2024). As the provincial capital, Quetta serves as a political hub where diverse ethnic groups, political parties, and civil society actors converge. However, women in Quetta face significant challenges when navigating public visibility, electoral competition, and party politics. Mobility restrictions, security concerns, patriarchal attitudes, and limited control over financial resources often make it difficult for women politicians to campaign freely or engage with constituents (Khan, 2023).

Furthermore, political parties in Balochistan typically operate within patriarchal hierarchies where men dominate decision-making. Women are often assigned secondary roles, such as mobilising female voters, but are excluded from core strategies, candidate selection processes, and access to political funding (Begum, 2023). Many women enter politics through reserved seats rather than general elections, which sometimes discourages the development of independent political

identities and reduces their influence within party structures (Rahim, 2024). In Quetta, where tribal leaders and religious groups hold strong social authority, women politicians may also face resistance from community members who question the legitimacy of women's leadership in public life (Ahmed, 2024).

Despite these constraints, many women continue to actively participate in politics and develop unique strategies to address gender-specific challenges. Coping strategies may include building informal support networks, aligning with influential male figures or party insiders, using digital platforms to engage voters when physical mobility is restricted, and balancing domestic responsibilities with public duties. Some women rely on social capital, such as family reputation or tribal affiliation, to gain legitimacy. In contrast, others pursue professional development, media visibility, and civil society partnerships to strengthen their political presence (Khan, 2023). These adaptive responses reflect a high degree of resilience and creativity in navigating a male-dominated political sphere.

Nevertheless, existing literature indicates a gap in localised studies focusing specifically on women politicians in Quetta. While national-level studies document the general challenges facing Pakistani women in politics, there is limited research examining how women in Quetta—given its tribal, multi-ethnic, and sensitive security context—negotiate these constraints and develop tailored coping strategies. Understanding these locally rooted experiences is essential for designing effective policy interventions, strengthening gender equality initiatives, and fostering a more inclusive political environment.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by exploring the coping strategies employed by women politicians in Quetta city as they struggle with structural, socio-cultural, and institutional challenges. By documenting these experiences, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of women's political resilience in Balochistan. It offers insights for political parties, policymakers, and civil society organisations working to improve women's representation and empowerment.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding the complex socio-political realities faced by women politicians in one of Pakistan's most culturally conservative and politically sensitive regions—Quetta, the capital of Balochistan. While the existing literature acknowledges that women in Pakistani politics confront institutional, cultural, and structural barriers, there remains a substantial knowledge gap about how these women actively cope with these challenges, especially in provincial contexts shaped by tribal power structures, low female literacy, and asymmetric access to political resources. This study provides insights that are locally grounded and academically relevant.

First, the study is significant because it highlights the resilience and agency of women politicians in Quetta. Instead of portraying women merely as victims of discrimination or patriarchal restrictions, this research emphasises their active strategies, decision-making abilities, and adaptive capacities in navigating a male-dominated political space. Such an approach broadens gender and political scholarship beyond focusing solely on barriers to also examining women's innovative responses, thereby presenting a more balanced and empowering narrative.

Second, the study contributes to the theoretical development of gender and political participation research in Pakistan. By focusing on coping strategies, the study integrates feminist political theory with resilience and empowerment frameworks, offering a deeper understanding of how women negotiate political identities, manage social expectations, and assert influence despite limited

institutional support. This helps advance academic discussions on women's agency within restrictive socio-political environments.

Third, the findings of this study have practical significance for policymakers, political parties, and civil society organisations. By identifying the specific challenges and coping mechanisms used by women politicians in Quetta, the research can inform the design of targeted interventions, such as leadership training, political mentorship programs, gender-sensitive party reforms, and enhanced security and mobility support. Understanding these strategies also enables stakeholders to create environments where more women can enter, stay, and progress within the political system.

Fourth, the study has significant implications for advancing democratic governance in Balochistan and Pakistan at large. Women's meaningful participation in politics enhances representation, Accountability, and policy responsiveness, especially on issues related to education, health, women's rights, and community development. By shedding light on how women sustain their political engagement despite constraints, the study underscores the importance of strengthening inclusive governance structures.

Finally, this research is essential because it provides a localised, culturally contextualised analysis. Most existing studies are national in scope and may overlook provincial specificities. By focusing on Quetta, the study offers nuanced insights into how tribal norms, ethnic diversity, socio-economic inequalities, and security dynamics uniquely shape women's political participation. These insights can help refine provincial policies, inform donor-funded gender programs, and contribute to comparative studies on women's political empowerment in marginalised regions.

Overall, this study is valuable academically, socially, and politically. It not only documents the struggles of women politicians in Quetta but also illuminates their strength, strategies, and contributions to democratic processes. In doing so, it paves the way for evidence-based reforms to enhance women's political empowerment in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Restricted Mobility and Domestic Roles

The restriction on women's participation in political decision-making affects a nation's democratic system. If men dominate the political system, there is very little chance of balancing it between men and women (Afzal & Farooqi, 2014). A woman participating in the political system finds it uncomfortable because of the limited acceptance of women as leaders (Rahman, 2014). In Pakistani society, the perception of political leaders and the qualities of a good leader are usually associated with men. Ali (2016) adds that, as women are considered less qualified for the political system, are only associated with household chores, and politics is a manly trait, women lack the specific qualities to become leaders (Neil & Domingo, 2016). However, current researches believe that leadership can be learnt and taught.

Krook (2017) argues that society never allows women to leave household chores and participate in politics; they have to play all their roles within the political system, which creates problems with balancing family and career at the same time.

Hora (2014) states that, due to traditional practices, a woman faces many hardships in her private life. For example, she has to attend meetings which men typically chair. This may affect her personal life and household matters, as she sometimes ignores her kids, which even makes her husband upset about what to say about her to her in-laws. Sometimes she remains busy in her dialogue with her colleagues for a long time, both in and outside the town, which leads to many problems (Saigol, 2016).

Hassan and Keyani (2015) argue that, due to day-to-day activities, she may not be able to devote enough time to her family, which may annoy them.

Baker and Chozick (2014) noted that women around the globe perform domestic chores and productive activities and play a role in economic development and rural economies.

Media, Messaging, and Harassment

The media landscape in Quetta also reflects gendered biases. Local outlets prioritise coverage of male-led rallies and established power brokers, often under-reporting women's political activities. At the same time, women who do engage publicly face harassment, particularly on digital platforms, where moral policing and character attacks are common. This toxic environment discourages women from running visible campaigns, and some choose to withdraw entirely from social media or hand over account management to male relatives to avoid abuse (Rahman, 2014).

Bureaucratic and Masculinised Spaces

Institutional interactions present additional hurdles for women leaders. In dealings with police, revenue, or utility departments, protocol norms often require male intermediaries, making it difficult for women to engage officials directly. In local governance spaces such as katcheries and jirga-style meetings, women are frequently ignored, spoken over, or not invited at all, further excluding them from decision-making (Hora, 2014). The bureaucratic environment itself favours men embedded in established patronage and fixer networks, leaving women at a disadvantage in navigating documentation, follow-ups, and administrative negotiations essential to constituency service (Baker & Chozick, 2014).

Coping Strategies

Social Capital

Acar (2011) defines Social capital as an individual's values and relationships within a group. It means that an individual's qualities help them cope with various problems in society. These values are embedded in social structures and foster reciprocal relationships among members of society (Grossman, 2013). It improves the performance of the different groups. Social interdependencies grow as people interact on various occasions. People exchange tangible and intangible things as part of shared norms, trust, cooperation, and association with other members of society (Wiesner, 2007). These interpersonal relationships enable them to function more effectively in achieving a similar goal (Lowndes, 2004).

Hawkins & Maurer (2009) elaborate that social capital can be seen as the power and strength of individuals, as the components of social capital (trust, social relationships) help to achieve specific goals and outcomes.

Women have been involved in politics for quite some time, making their contributions in the political arena universal (Lowndes, 2004). Many phenomenal women around the world have helped the world believe in women's empowerment, have made significant contributions to national development, and have also received global recognition; some of them are Benazir Bhutto, Indira Gandhi, and Helry Clinton (Maclean, 2010). Despite significant accomplishments worldwide, the number of female participants remains low.

In a democratic setup, people are treated similarly and heard. However, women are not given equal opportunity to participate in political affairs; they are underrepresented socially, economically, and politically (McCants, 2005).

Schroeder, Zeller, and Noameshie (2013) discuss that, particularly in Asian countries, such as South Asia, free mobility for women is not accepted; therefore, she is always under criticism from orthodox groups, which affects her goals. As in other parts of the world, women in Pakistan lack equal access to political opportunities (Shahin, 2016). Despite significant efforts by the Pakistan government to ensure equal treatment for women politicians, they are unable to achieve equality in educational opportunities, political awareness, and representation in parliament (Tundi, 2014).

Research Question

How do women politicians cope with the challenges in the political arena?

Results

According to respondents, entering politics is a challenge for women in Balochistan, where they are seen as homemakers rather than decision-makers. Women politicians have identified strategies to cope with social, cultural, and political barriers, including building self-confidence, seeking family support, and leveraging their social capital.

Women politicians discussed that women are considered "weak" based on being a female, as even if she is in a respectable position, she has to face discriminatory behaviour from the male section of society. One of the interviewees said that.

Being a member of a respectable part of the country, yet when I go to places, people treat me as an inferior part of society; they show less respect for my designation, rather, they show their non-accepting behaviour towards me.

Women politicians expressed that they often face critical behaviour from their male colleagues, and on forums where ordinary people usually criticise women politicians. According to respondents, maintaining self-confidence is the key to moving forward and confronting criticism.

Before joining politics, I was aware of such situations that would happen to me. So I was mentally prepared for these things, I knew I would not be given 100% acceptance from society, I would be criticised, I would be harassed, and I would be discouraged by everyone, but I would have to keep my self-confidence up.

Women politicians have discussed that living in a patriarchal society where tradition and culture are rigid regarding working women, especially when it comes to politics, which is a thoroughly "no-go area" in the common perception of people.

The respondents discussed that women in Pakistan, especially in Balochistan, are expected to be at home and to take care of household tasks. These limitations make it difficult for women to participate in civic activities.

Women politicians expressed that they often face negative remarks and character assassination problems from the general public, especially during election times, when people directly attack their character and try to portray a negative image of female politicians in front of the public. To address this problem, women politicians discussed it.

Being a senior member of the party, I have a bond with the people I serve and my party members, as well as other party members, so whenever I face such a problem, my support system (coworkers, party members), through strong bonding, stood by me to give me the strength to face such issues strongly.

Discussion

Around the world, women are engaged in politics, facing challenges and working to overcome them to reach their desired destination. These problems include an unfair distribution of resources, a lack of acceptance, a lack of confidence in women's leadership, and limited opportunities. Facing all these challenges, women need coping strategies to get their political careers started.

Hawkins & Maurer (2009) define social capital as one of the coping strategies for women politicians. He further describes social capital as the strength of women to move forward and survive in the patriarchal setup of Pakistani society. Furthermore, social capital is considered the bond between similar people, as bonding is essential for people with common goals to accomplish, supported by social capital that leads to shared desires.

In addition, bridging in society is the networking among various members of society. It includes the exchange of information and ideas. It helps increase reliance and confidence among people, as seen with women politicians. It is of primary importance to build bridges among various groups in society (Hawkins & Maurer, 2009).

Shahin (2016) argues that social capital helps women reach the point where they can achieve their goals and, by then, contribute to national development.

Mccants (2005) points out that social capital increases if it is used, as it is based on trust and shared norms. Women politicians increase their social capital by bonding with people.

Lowndes (2004) argues that social capital helps women stand firm and confront the barriers of the political journey.

Schroeder, Zeller, and Noameshie (2013) argue that components of social capital (trust, bonding, bridging) are tools for confronting the challenges of politics, as they help political women by facilitating joint efforts and actions that mostly involve networking in conditions where individuals might be uncertain to collaborate. In short, social capital is an effective tool for coping with political challenges.

Conclusion

Women politicians in Quetta navigate one of Pakistan's most complex socio-political landscapes—shaped by patriarchal norms, tribal structures, limited institutional support, and persistent security concerns. Despite these barriers, they continue to demonstrate remarkable resilience by employing diverse coping strategies, including leveraging family and tribal networks, forming informal women's support alliances, using digital media to compensate for mobility constraints, and balancing domestic responsibilities with public leadership roles. Their experiences highlight not only the struggles associated with gendered political participation but also the agency and adaptation of women in challenging environments.

The findings underscore that women's political participation in Quetta remains constrained not by a lack of capability or motivation, but by structural inequalities, institutional biases within political parties, and deeply rooted socio-cultural expectations. Coping strategies alone—though effective in helping women survive politically—are insufficient for ensuring long-term empowerment or meaningful representation. Therefore, systematic reforms, institutional support, and cultural transformation are essential to strengthen women's political roles at both local and provincial levels.

Ultimately, enhancing women's political agency in Quetta is significant not only for gender equality but also for the overall advancement of democratic governance in Balochistan. Women politicians bring unique perspectives, community-centred priorities, and inclusive leadership

styles that can contribute to more responsive, socially grounded policymaking. Supporting them is therefore not merely a gender issue, but a democratic imperative.

Recommendations

Based on the challenges identified and the coping strategies observed among women politicians in Quetta, the following recommendations are proposed to support and strengthen their participation:

Strengthen Political Party Reforms

- Political parties in Balochistan should institutionalise gender-sensitive internal policies that guarantee women's inclusion in decision-making bodies, candidate selection committees, and key campaign teams.
- Reserved seats should be accompanied by leadership training and mentorship programs to help women transition into active political roles.
- Transparent allocation of party resources, including campaign funds, should be ensured for women candidates.

Enhance Skills Development and Capacity Building

- Regular training in political communication, policy analysis, digital campaigning, negotiation skills, and leadership development should be provided to women politicians.
- Partnerships with universities, NGOs, and training institutes can support professional growth.

Improve Security and Mobility Support

- Women politicians in Quetta often face mobility restrictions due to security concerns. The government and political parties should coordinate to:
- Provide safe transportation arrangements, especially during campaigns.
- Establish secure community political spaces where women can meet constituents.

Facilitate Access to Resources and Networks

- Create women-led political networks, caucuses, and community forums that offer mutual support, mentorship, and resource-sharing.
- Encourage collaboration between women legislators, local councillors, and civil society groups to strengthen solidarity and collective bargaining power.

Promote Digital Inclusion

- Digital platforms offer opportunities for political visibility and constituent engagement.
- Training in social media management, online advocacy, and e-governance tools can help women overcome traditional mobility barriers.

Increase Public Awareness and Social Acceptance

- Launch awareness campaigns involving community elders, religious leaders, youth groups, and local media to reshape public perceptions about women's leadership.
- Highlight the contributions of successful women politicians from Balochistan to inspire broader acceptance.

Strengthen Legal and Institutional Frameworks

- The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) should implement mechanisms to monitor and promote compliance with gender quotas at party and provincial levels.

- Introduce legal safeguards against political harassment, intimidation, and discriminatory practices faced by women candidates.

Support Work–Life Balance for Women Politicians

- Develop family-support programs, such as childcare facilities and flexible meeting schedules, to help women manage both domestic and political responsibilities.
- Encourage political parties to adopt gender-sensitive scheduling norms.

Encourage Research and Data Collection

- More empirical studies focusing on Quetta and other districts of Balochistan are needed to document the evolving experiences of women politicians.
- Local universities and research organisations should collaborate to produce policy-oriented research.

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