

THE POLITICS OF LAND OWNERSHIP AND WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN GILGIT-BALTISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Land ownership in Gilgit Baltistan is shaped historically by princely state authority, communal land system, state interferences, culminating in recent controversies surrounding the Gilgit Baltistan Land Reforms Act, 2025. These dynamics show the importance of land for political power. Within this backdrop, women's access to land is limited not only by legal ambiguities but also by deep rooted patriarchal norms that limit their authority, identity and participation in both formal and informal political spheres. This study explores how educated women in Gilgit Baltistan experience, negotiate, interpret land ownership and inheritance. Using phenomenological qualitative methods, semi structured interviews supplemented with social media content analysis; the research explores women's perception of landownership, belonging, authority and political participation. The findings show that despite progress in education and public visibility, women's claim to land remains largely symbolic. Gender practices, the association of land with male honor, and male dominated bureaucratic spaces restrict women's ability to exercise their right and control over the inherited property. Women's exclusion from landownership further weakens their political agency and increase vulnerability in contexts of divorce, widowhood, and domestic violence. The study further argues that land in Gilgit Baltistan functions not only as an economic resource, but also marker of identity and gateway to political participation, yet women remain structurally marginalized in all three dimensions. Legal reforms cannot be the only solution for this exclusion but transformation of cultural and institutional practices that govern land, belonging and political voice.

Keywords: Landownership, inheritance, politics, gender, women's political participation, patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION

Inheritance has long served as a principal means through which wealth moves across generations, shaping who gains access to security and who remains vulnerable (reference required). In agrarian societies land ownership is not just economical asset but also a marker of authority, power and belonging and social status (Agarwal 1994). Across South Asia and Pakistan in particular, this sphere is deeply gendered (Agarwal 1994). Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, women's access to land remains significantly constrained. Patriarchal customs,

which are frequently presented as vital for preserving family honor or cohesion, consistently restrict women's claims and marginalize them from property-related decision-making (Ahmad, 2010). Legislation such as the Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act formally secures women's inheritance rights, yet everyday practices often undermine these protections. Daughters are frequently pressured to surrender their shares to male relatives, compensated instead with dowry, gifts, or symbolic exchanges that hold no legal equivalence (Rao & Rao, 1980; Rubab, Parveen &

Usman, 2016). Land ownership thus continues to embody masculine privilege and consolidates men's dominance over women's economic and political futures, as numerous scholars argue (Agarwal, 1994; Razavi, 2003). Male privilege in land inheritance and ownership structures women's **political and economic marginalization** (Razavi, 2003).

These factors play a significant role in the politics of GB where land has historically been connected to political authority, communal identity, power and local governance. The area has a limbo constitutional status after the accession to Pakistan since 1948. The unique position of the area, geo strategically centre and geographically marginal and its history of princely states, communal land-sharing systems, and later bureaucratic interferences have shaped it as a complex land structures. The recent Land Reform Act passed by the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly has generated debates around ownership, customary rights, and state authority. The Gilgit-Baltistan Land Reforms Act, 2025, passed by the region's Assembly last week in haste has sparked widespread controversy and alarm, revealing deep legal ambiguities and institutional flaws that could pave the way for elite capture and systemic land grabbing (Baig, 2025). GB is not merely an economic resource; it is a site where power, legitimacy, and political control are contested.

In this backdrop, women relationship to land is shaped by both formal legal obscurities and gendered norms. Districts like Hunza, despite the educational progress, land ownership remains strongly patriarchal. According to *The High Asia Herald*, in Hunza "men get all the land and women are denied their share, Neither ... constitutional ... nor customary law ... is honoured," even though women's awareness of their rights has increased. Hunza is generally considered to be a more educated society with literacy rate 77% While women increasingly occupy educational and professional spaces, patriarchal structures governing land remain firmly intact. Yet the extent to which women resist, negotiate, or internalize these norms has not been sufficiently documented.

While existing literature extensively covers the legal frameworks and general socio-cultural barriers to women's land rights in South Asia, there remains a significant gap in understanding the nuanced lived experiences of women in Gilgit-Baltistan. Specifically, this study addresses how women

perceive and negotiate land ownership in relation to their political agency amidst recent land reforms and changing social dynamics. By exploring how the politics of land ownership intersect with women's political participation in Gilgit-Baltistan. Through a political anthropology lens, which prioritizes understanding how power relations are culturally constructed and negotiated in specific contexts, the paper examines how women navigate both the symbolic and material dimensions of land: as a resource tied to economic security, as a basis for political voice, and as a contested domain shaped by familial, communal, and state power.

The central question guiding this research is whether rising education and social mobility have shifted women's views on land ownership and political participation, or whether deeply embedded norms continue to prevail. By situating women's everyday negotiations within the broader political economy of land in GB, the study highlights how land functions as both a gateway to political participation and a mechanism of gendered marginalization. Understanding the politics of land is therefore essential to understanding the structures that shape women's political agency and the broader dynamics of power in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Literature Review

Global and South Asian Context

The global picture remains sobering. Women, according to Bennett (1981), own less than two percent of titled land worldwide. In South Asia, the situation is shaped by the dominance of patrilineal traditions, where property rights; even when secured in statutory law, are routinely mediated through male lineage (Adelman & Peterman, 2014). The Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (2014) has pointed out that women's exclusion from land and natural resources is not incidental but patterned across regions, leaving them structurally dependent on male kin. In India, Agarwal (1999) linked the lack of property rights directly to women's political and social subordination. Carroll (1991) similarly argued that women's disinheritance feeds into the persistence of dowry practices. Customs such as cousin marriages or the practice of haq-bakhshwana, where women are symbolically "married to the Quran" to prevent their claim to land, show the lengths to which patriarchal systems go to ensure property remains in male hands

(Ahmad, Bibi & Mahmood, 2012). Chowdhry (1997) and Patel (2006) further demonstrate how women who pursue legal claims often confront moral censure and accusations of selfishness, suggesting that law alone cannot undo deeply embedded social norms. A burgeoning literature also shows that property rights make beneficiaries more active participants in politics (Nandwani, 2023).

In Pakistan, estimates of women's land ownership remain low. Nationally it is under three percent (HRCP, 2008), with Punjab slightly higher at around 11 percent (Shafqit & Zahir, 2016). Researchers often point to women's restricted mobility, limited awareness of inheritance law, and reliance on male relatives for legal processes as critical barriers (Mumtaz & Noshirwani, 2007). In practice, women are socialized to equate property with family honor, which makes pressing for their share appear disruptive or shameful. Even where land is nominally registered in a women's name, men may retain actual authority. Mehdi (2002), for instance, describes cases where women were "owners on paper," while decisions about cultivation, sale, or rental rested entirely with brothers or husbands. Such examples make clear that the issue is not just about legal ownership but about whether women have meaningful control.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis is primarily guided by socialist feminist theory that provides an analytical lens to understand exclusion of women from land and limits their political participation as a product of **converging** systems of capitalism and patriarchy. Socialist feminism provides an appropriate framework to analyze material conditions and social structures which are contributing to gender inequality. Within this framework, women excluded from ownership ensures continued dependence on men despite of their unpaid labor in agriculture that sustain families and local economy (Eisenstein, 1979; Collins, 1993). In GB, this dimension is pertinent where traditional patriarchal norms that governs land inheritance are now producing new capitalist pressures due to recent developmental approaches. The denial to inheritance reinforces power relations not just upholding the tradition. The recent GB Land Reforms Act-2025 formalizes land distribution and marketization which will aggravate existing patriarchal structures by disinheriting women and

enabling elite capture through capitalist means if adequate safeguards are not provided. Investigation of women's perception of land ownership elucidates the internalization and contestation of these intertwined structures of patriarchal control and emerging capitalist land relations.

Methods

Research Design

A phenomenological research design is adopted to seek the subjective experiences, meanings, and interpretations which women connect to land ownership and political participation in GB. This approach is suitable to synthesize the nuanced lived experiences of women, providing explanation of their interaction with land and political mechanisms. Being a qualitative choice, feminist constructionist epistemology and phenomenology provides essence of lived experience and acknowledge that they are social and cultural constructs. This combination concedes recognition of patriarchal structures and power dynamics and exploration of individual perceptions shaping these understandings and interactions with land.

Data Collection

Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews (Bernard, 1994) suitable to gather thorough information on multifaceted concerns like women, education, inheritance rights, land ownership, and transfer within families. A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure a relevant dataset. The selection criteria contained:

- Women from GB with a focus on Hunza district due to its unique social and educational context;
- Diverse age groups between 25-65 to capture generational perspectives;
- Different academic backgrounds and different marital status; and
- Direct experience with land disputes or claims.

A sample size of 12 subjects were selected following the above mentioned criteria which is common for phenomenological studies. Multiple key informants like educators, social workers and local leader were consulted to mitigate potential bias, and were helpful to identify potential subjects for their knowledge of the local community dynamics and women issues. An interview guide included a demographic, opinion, and experience-based

questions was utilized to ensure depth and consistency.

Additionally, a social media content analysis was conducted to explore how women express political engagement and views on land rights on virtual platforms. Over 100 public posts authored by women from GB on Facebook and Twitter (X) were purposively sampled between January and June 2024. Keywords like “land rights GB”, “women’s inheritance Gilgit”, “GB Land Reform Act”, and local relevant terms were used to identify the posts. The analysis focused on themes including political awareness, land-related activism, and expressions of identity. This digital data complemented interview findings by capturing forms of informal political participation occurring outside household and community structures, and provided a wider women engagement perspective.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis. The first step is the stage of familiarizing and understanding the data and in this stage, all the recorded interviews were transcribed and started developing initial codes. The second step included assigning numbers to the initial codes from the first transcribed interview and looking at how many times one code is repeating in the coming interviews that give an understanding of the patterns as well. In the third stage, all those codes were put under different concepts used in the theoretical frame. The next and fourth step included putting these concepts into different categories with a feminist lens used in this study. Step five included theoretical categories into different themes. Finally, these themes were reported under the results section, supported by direct quotes from participants and examples from social media content.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines for research involving human subjected was observed in this study. Informed consent was asked from all participants prior to the interview session. They were informed about the voluntary participation, purpose of the study, withdrawal right at any point, and the confidentiality and anonymity ensuring procedures. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants and the data is stored

securely on password-protected folder and devices only accessible to the author.

Results and Discussion

Awareness of Inheritance Rights

The data reveals a complex picture regarding women's awareness of their inheritance rights, particularly concerning land ownership. While not all participants possessed a comprehensive understanding, the few who were aware often had never claimed their rightful share. One participant powerfully articulated the deeply ingrained cultural narrative by mentioning that from childhood, a daughter is reminded as “Khalg Deghd” in Wakhi, meaning “someone else’s daughter.” This term carries significant implications, suggesting that a daughter's primary belonging and claim to resources lie with her future husband's family, thereby subtly but effectively minimizing her entitlement within her natal home and justifying the withholding of her land share. This cultural framing creates an implicit expectation that daughters should not assert claims that could be seen as disrupting their natal family's coherence or honor.

In contrast, another participant shared an experience where her family had consistently granted women their shares, shaping her awareness of this right. A divorcee highlighted the stark reality of lacking tangible assets: “After getting divorce I realized that I had nothing, no house to live, no land nothing, this derived me to know about my inheritance rights.” This personal crisis served as a catalyst for her awareness, underscoring the material vulnerability that underpins the issue. Another participant recounted her father advising her against discussing land, stating “it’s not my domain to enter,” further illustrating the deeply gendered demarcation of property discussions.

The findings indicate that most participants were not well-versed in customary or Islamic laws of inheritance, and even those with some education on their rights had not acted upon them. One interviewee, who had previously worked on gender discrimination in education, admitted she hadn't explored women's inheritance rights, suggesting a potential disconnect between broader women's empowerment initiatives and the specific issue of land. Crucially, none of the participants had formally claimed their inheritance rights or even raised questions about them.

A poignant narrative came from a divorcee who, upon visiting her parents, expressed her feeling of rootlessness: "I answered them that it's difficult for me to visit as I don't belong to anywhere now." This prompted her father to realize her predicament and promise her "Khun Jai" in Wakhi, meaning "land to build your own house"—a promise that brought her immense relief. She reflected that post-divorce, despite her education and job, she lacked tangible security. This illustrates that while education provides alternative forms of capital, it often does not replace the foundational security and belonging associated with land.

Another participant shared receiving a piece of land as a gift from her nephews to build a house in her native village, despite having purchased multiple properties elsewhere. This act, driven by her desire "to stay connected to her area," reveals the profound symbolic and emotional value of ancestral land, even when not claimed as a formal inheritance. Similarly, a participant who bought land in her native village before marriage noted that while her parents acknowledged it was "hers," their stance shifted after her marriage outside the region, leading her to not pursue her claim.

Two compelling case studies highlight the complex interplay of awareness, societal pressure, and legal battles:

The first concerned a grandmother, the sole daughter, who was initially denied her father's land and house, which were distributed among male cousins. Only when she faced homelessness did she pursue her claim, legally fighting for her rights in a time (approximately twenty-five years prior) when legal access was limited and women appearing in court was considered taboo. This case powerfully demonstrates that even before formal education became widespread in the area, there was a rudimentary awareness among women about their inheritance rights and even the available legal procedures. Despite her courage, the issue was settled out of court with a promise of "Nan Kharj" (Wakhi for daily expenses) from those who occupied her father's land. This promise, however, was never fulfilled, leading to a miserable life. The participant expressed regret at not being able to support her grandmother then, emphasizing: "She fought all this alone, no one was there to support her at that time."

The second case involved a mother-in-law who, as an only daughter, fought for nearly twenty-five years to reclaim her father's land, which had been

distributed among male relatives. While they eventually won the legal battle and divided the land among the sisters, the participant questioned the ultimate benefit: "what's the benefit after fighting for almost half of their life, the mental trauma they were going through and the hate they were getting from the society, the society shaming them for claiming their father's land and in the end, they don't have control and authority over that land. They are not the ones to make the decisions regarding the land, the land is controlled and managed by their sons."

These two case studies offer a crucial insight: while women in earlier generations might have demonstrated an awareness of rights and courage to pursue legal avenues, the current generation, despite increased general education, often lacks the legal literacy and collective will to translate awareness into action. The findings suggest that education alone has not been sufficient to dismantle the deep-seated patriarchal structures influencing women's land rights. Instead, it seems that social stigma and the immense personal cost of challenging entrenched practices continue to prevail, leading many educated women to internalize these norms or simply avoid confrontation. This highlights the crucial distinction between general education and legal literacy, where the latter is vital for translating theoretical rights into practical action.

The concern about "endangered identity" and "demographics" if daughters claim land emerged as a critical, nuanced finding. One participant expressed: "If we look at the geographical position, for example a woman who is married out of the community brings her husband and children than we challenge our population and challenge the demographics. When daughters get the portion than it's a challenge to the demography and if one does this it has a trickle-down option. Daughters should get their share or not I am still struggling." This sentiment reveals a profound societal anxiety where women's claims to land are perceived not merely as individual rights but as a threat to communal integrity, territorial boundaries, and even the "purity" of community demographics. This highlights how land claims become deeply intertwined with issues of collective identity and cultural survival, placing an immense burden on women who consider asserting their legal rights.

In response to these challenges, one innovative policy idea was highlighted: the participant

proposed including a clause in the Nikkah nama (marriage contract) stating that "the day I have a first child that house should be transferred on the woman's name." This practical suggestion reflects a desire to secure women's property rights proactively within a culturally acceptable framework, bypassing traditional inheritance pressures and recognizing women's role in family formation.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of a mother "bashing" her daughter for asking for land revealed how internalized patriarchy operates, even within inter-generational female relationships. The participant stated: "woman especially mothers are more possessive about land for her sons they don't want to divide the land for their daughters." This finding underscores that patriarchal norms are not only imposed externally but are also reinforced from within families, often by women who have internalized their expected roles and the perceived importance of sons in maintaining family lineage and property. This adds a crucial layer of complexity to understanding resistance and compliance among women.

The data above shows that not all women are aware of their inheritance rights; those who are aware have often never claimed them. The two case studies indicate that even before formal education, women were sometimes aware of their inheritance rights and legal procedures. This suggests that while education has expanded, it has not significantly altered women's practical engagement with inheritance rights. Educated women often relate land to masculinity and male power, which paradoxically seems to strengthen patriarchal structures rather than challenge them in practice.

Control and Authority

The data further discloses that control and authority over land remain largely elusive even for those women who do receive a share in land. Women are traditionally excluded from decisions and managing land as it is consistently viewed as a male domain. Patriarchy is reinforced, as one participant noted, "land is associated with honor" that is always controlled by men. A persuasive case study exemplified this impediment: a woman who received a land share in inheritance was required to transfer its title. According to the procedure she had to visit the land revenue office to sign the property papers which was considered a taboo to visit that office as it is perceived as a male space and was abused by the family to access that place. The

institutional barriers and gendered nature of public places where bureaucratic process becomes a hurdle to assert land ownership by women is vividly demonstrated by this example. The findings imply that perception of administrative institutions as male territories is significantly impacting actualization of property right by women.

Identity and Belonging

The relationship between women and land, a core concept within political anthropology, is deeply connected with questions of identity and belonging. Unfortunately, the women have been denied of that identity the participant mentioned. When a woman is married out of the area she is considered as commodity and she will relate to someone else land existing somewhere she continues. Women always wanted to stay connected to her land as historically women are just unpaid labors for agricultural activities and would not get anything else. One of the participants also reveals that almost half of our lives we have worked so hard in the fields equally with parents and never realized that this land does not belong to us. *"Whenever I visit those places now, I get emotional thinking about the hard work and in return getting nothing."* Owning a piece of land makes you feel that you belong to somewhere on earth, historically this belongingness is missing the participant says after buying a piece of land on my own money makes me feel more relatable and connected. The participant said that women want to stay connected to their land especially when she is married out of the region and for staying connected, she needs to own a piece of land which she can use according to her. One of the participants mentions *"I don't feel connected to the land where I am married because I don't have that land on my name nor I have any authority over it."* A women do not belong to the land I would say a women is nomad, she is at their father and brothers land and then after marriage she is on husband land, if the marriage doesn't work for her and she is sent back empty hand". The nomadic relationship with the land is not continuous and constant it is very much broken depending on the relationship. The breaking of relationship with land breaks and then as an identity effect nomadic thing as women do not belong to anywhere like fathers and then husband. If a divorcee for another marriage a third land is shown to her. It's a very unstable from home to home and relationship to relationship she

continues. One of the participants says that man's relationship with land is different like a lot of outsiders will come and buy land man are more money oriented and they sell land for big amount, man consider land just a capital, property whereas women approach is very motherly approach, they treat land with kindness because land produces something and man don't have that relationship with land. The data reveals that women always want to stay connected to her land by owning it but the present cultural practice does not make them feel the belongingness as they want. The identity of that women is recognized until she is alive after death it vanishes especially if she is married out of the community. The data also says that women live a nomadic life in the community and does not belong to anywhere, she is just an unpaid labor firstly at father's land and then husband's land. Women always want to stay connected to their land and derive their identity from that land.

Economic Autonomy and Vulnerability

Land ownership give economic autonomy to women, owning a piece of land give a confidence to women in taking decisions especially the divorced women have no place to live. Those women who are single mother it's a big thing to have a piece of land, like all humans are capable of earning money. The participant said that it's important for women especially common women to own some land so she can grow crops or use it in business which will empower her more. Seeing a business in sharing like if you have 40% or 50% share if you have the more percentage the more power you have if you have 50% you have equal power she continues. "If you have land this happens in marriage sharing things equally the husband won't abuse or manipulate the women. Women will not stay in abusive relationship because she will have her place." Most women live in abusive relation because they don't have place to live I and when she come back to her brother the brother's family consider her a burden but don't think that they are having her share. If they will have given their share they will not live in an abusive relation or commit suicide the participant continues. Another participant adds that it's important for women to own a land. Women are not involved in the decision making of land because she does not own it. The data shows that economic stability and social connectivity is also associated with land. It's a security and women will

feel secure and will have their own houses that they can get back. The data also says that men derive power from the land as they are the sole owner and its matter of power structure. The socialist feminist theory also explains the situation that women are burdened double than men because women have to do the domestic work which is unpaid labor. The data reveals that women in GB are unpaid labors on their land and in return they get nothing. The data also emphasis that mostly women stay in abusive and toxic relationship because they have no place to go. The findings show the connection between land and protection from violence. Participants linked the denial of land ownership directly to women's inability to leave abusive marriages or to avoid vulnerability in widowhood or divorce. It shows that land can function as a form of social insurance.

Political Participation

The findings illustrated a stark contradiction; even highly educated women in GB often lacks interest in or awareness of formal political structures and processes. The majority are unaware of land-related legal entitlement limiting their capacity to advocate for accountability and reforms. This minimal commitment empowers beneficiaries in becoming more politically active as noted by Nandwani (2023). While education opens doors to professional careers and awareness, it could not be translated into active political participation in the realm of land ownership or the courage to challenge gender norms.

Additionally, disconnect between social media activism and personal claims has emerged. Participants that were active on social media had never claimed their own inheritance despite raising their voices for land ownership for women in GB. This suggests that digital space does not necessarily enables overcoming the personal and social barriers to assert individual claims in a patriarchal system though informal political participation and awareness is accessible virtually. It is critical to note that women's right to claim land ownership is an apolitical concern as it conceals the inherent political character of power structure and resource distribution. Land matters are relegated to the male domain, hinders women mobilizations and advocacy for inclusivity concerning customary or Islamic land laws due to this misperception. The political structure and bureaucracy also play a vital role as described by participants that administrative

places are male-dominated and unapproachable for them, making land entitlement difficult. Simplification of procedures and women inclusive staffing could bring substantial difference to make these spaces navigable for women.

Subsequently, the findings illustrate the inextricable relationship between identity and belonging that shape political voice of women. A pattern is observed from expression of participants that they felt like outsiders within their marital and natal due to lack of land. This highlights that ownership of land is not only a political or economic concern, rather its fundamental to legitimize the lineage of women. Women remain excluded without this acceptance despite of their financial independence thus eliminating their inherent political standing within their communities.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates a paradoxical situation in Gilgit-Baltistan that the progress in education and economic opportunities has not proportionally been converted into the political engagement with governing structures and tangible improvements in land ownership. Land significantly remains male-dominated despite increased awareness of women for their rights. Accounts of the participants reveals that daughters are frequently compelled to surrender their claims to ascertain family honor, relationships, or a sense of decency furthering patriarchy. Formidable bureaucratic barriers and deeply ingrained social norms prevent genuine control, making land ownership symbolic rather than functional even in cases where land is formally transferred to women.

The study unequivocally exhibits that land acts as a multifaced source of authority, identity, and belonging way beyond its financial aspect. Exclusion of women from ownership of land restrict their political voice as well as compromising their material security. The denial of inheritance solidifies marginal status of women elucidated by the emotional narrative of displacement and “not belonging anywhere”. Furthermore, the findings illustrate a crucial link between increased vulnerability to violence, dependence, and limited choices in marriage, divorce, and widowhood with lack of land rights. Land ownership represents a passage to autonomy, political participation, and safety despite of this unrealized transformative potential.

The deeply rooted and pervasive structural inequalities shows that mere legal reforms are inadequate in altering experience of women with land. The latest debates concerning the Gilgit-Baltistan Land Reforms Act, 2025, bolster the perception that land governance is controversial influenced by historical remnants, local power dynamics, and state authority. Women face a multi-layer conflict i.e., struggle against patriarchal norms and equitable ancestral land ownership resulting in exclusion from decision-making and control despite of legal provisions. Awareness on land inheritance remains questionable regardless of digital activism for women’s land rights by a few participants. The absence of women in recent protests on the land reform act suggests that majority of women do not perceive land rights as a political concern which requires collective engagement. Ensuring that relevant institutions are accessible and inclusive, improving legal literacy of women, and raising transformation in family norms are interconnected interventions. Eventually, the study reveals that political participation of women needs recognition of land as a foundation of identity, security and political power.

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