

PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURES INFLUENCING WOMEN'S ENGAGEMENT AND ROLE IN THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF AZAD JAMMU AND KASHMIR

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ABSTRACT

The patriarchy in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) is deeply embedded in the historical and cultural traditions of the Kashmir region. An analysis of historical phases indicates that, although women have had some involvement in political spheres, their participation has been restricted by male-dominated state institutions and societal structures. The period following partition is characterised by political dependence, with women's involvement shaped by patriarchal patterns. In 1970, women participated in political activities for the first time. Prior to this, they had not been actively encouraged to engage in political pursuits, primarily due to the conflict situation prevalent in the region, notably the tense India-Pakistan relations, which fostered war and an undemocratic environment. After the partition, women in AJK encountered numerous obstacles to their political and social advancement. These barriers were predominantly sustained by patriarchal norms that confined women's public roles to serving male interests. This research examines the practices that restrict women's political participation and their roles within the context of Azad Jammu and Kashmir.

Keywords: Patriarchy, women, politics, Azad Jammu and Kashmir

Introduction

Culture and traditions have a significant impact on the politics of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). Due to patriarchal culture, women are not encouraged to take part in politics. This concept is rooted in the historical phases of Kashmir. Hence, a few women are credited with breaking the barrier drawn by society, which restricted women from public spaces, including politics. After the partition of Kashmir into two parts, one part of Kashmir came under the administration of Pakistan and the other is affiliated with India. In Pakistan's administered Kashmir, which is my research area, from 1947 to the present day, women in politics have not gained any exemplary status. Although the AJK state has a higher female-to-male ratio in higher education, their political decisions, that is, from contesting to polling, are

controlled by males, who make their political decisions. Many social activist reformers and women are advocating for women's political rights, and constitutional quotas were allocated; however, women are still facing issues in contesting elections or even casting votes, which is often mediated by male family members. Through this study, I have discussed the patriarchal culture, an issue which plays a vital role in restricting women from politics in AJK (Nabi, Ali, & Shafiq, 2023). Kashmir, "heaven on earth," is renowned for its natural beauty and rich history. Unfortunately, this region remained a focal point for many external powers, who interfered in its political affairs for their own vested interests. Thus, due to its geopolitics, which is bridging atomic powers, AJK remained under the control of different political and military powers, which shaped its

cultural and political behaviour (Kalis, 2013). Historically, the nature of political participation varied across different phases of Kashmir's history. In the ancient political history of Kashmir, some women were prominent in politics, some served as rulers, and some were administrative and military commanders (Bazaz, 1959). A few renowned women politicians were their first queens; Yasovati, Sugandha, Kalyannadha, Khandone, Amriprabhaand, and many others who earned their names in politics as rulers and administrators of their states instead of their male family members (Bhat & Rajeshwari, 2022).

On 24 October 1947, the first government was established in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). Despite the creation of a governing structure, political stability did not translate into favourable conditions for women. Most women who entered politics did so through inheritance, and their political decisions, from contesting elections to casting votes, were largely controlled by male family members. Following the partition of Kashmir, India and Pakistan engaged in wars and recurring conflicts, during which the United States played a mediating role in peacekeeping and monitoring efforts, framing political development as essential for the people of Kashmir (Korbel, 1949). AJK's status as a conflict zone further complicated women's political empowerment. Yet, by the 21st century, women began to take a greater interest in political affairs, engaging actively through various modes of socialisation. This growing presence of women in politics signals progress compared with earlier decades. Given that women constitute nearly half of the population, their participation is vital not only in managing households but also in shaping the public sphere, particularly in regions influenced by liberation movements. Ensuring women's inclusion in politics is therefore a democratic necessity.

The Legislative Assembly of AJK upholds democratic principles, and women are increasingly striving to strengthen their presence in political life. However, like other parts of the subcontinent, the state remains influenced by patriarchal systems and cultural bonds. Women's empowerment varies across regions, reflecting uneven progress

shaped by social norms, political structures, and historical legacies. Despite the high female education ratio in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), women's political participation remains constrained by conflict and patriarchal norms. Living in a conflict-affected region, women face "marginalisation" that is difficult to overcome, as their political interests are often discouraged by traditional mindsets. Nevertheless, women in AJK are becoming increasingly aware of their political rights and are gradually empowering themselves in the political sphere. This shift reflects a historical pattern: Kashmiri women once held positions of rule, but their continuity in political affairs was disrupted for centuries.

Social norms, traditions, and cultural barriers continue to constrain women's political engagement, and many communities remain unwelcoming of women's political aspirations. However, liberal movements in Kashmir have encouraged women to stand alongside men in political struggles. Historical records from 1947 to 1970 reveal a male-dominated political landscape, with women participating only passively and in ordinary roles (Matloob, Shabbir, & Saher, 2020). The Azad Jammu and Kashmir Interim Constitution Act of 1974 marked a turning point by opening pathways for women's political inclusion. Initially, only one woman was added to the Legislative Assembly, later expanded to two. By 1985, five women were included as assembly members, among them Sabra Altaf, Norin Arif, and Begum Shireen Waheed, who remained active in politics for decades (Matloob et al., 2020). Notably, Begum K. H. Khurshid contested a by-election and played an active role in the independence movement, while Begum Raja Haider also became an assembly member. Despite these milestones, most women members in the AJK Assembly were confined to the Ministry of Social Welfare, reflecting limited political influence. The five reserved seats introduced under the 1974 Act have not been increased, creating a structural hurdle for women's political development. These reserved seats often benefit women from influential families, while qualified women without strong political backgrounds struggle to utilise their potential (Nabi, Ali, &

Shafiq, 2023). Thus, while reserved seats provide symbolic representation, they also reinforce elitism and limit broader empowerment.

In addition, a significant number of Kashmiri women have migrated and settled in European countries and other parts of the world, where they actively participate in politics and contribute to diaspora mobilisation. However, within AJK, some female party members have faced difficulties in securing tickets due to a lack of trust from party leadership, reflecting persistent patriarchal barriers. The broader freedom movement underscores every Kashmiri's desire for a durable solution through peaceful negotiation and political harmony (Rakha, 2016).

The struggle for empowerment can be advanced through education, awareness, national identity consciousness, and women's political activism. Over the past two decades, Kashmiri women have increasingly utilised various means of empowerment, including exercising the right to vote without external pressure, engaging in political campaigning, expressing themselves freely within party agendas, and contributing to the formation and organisation of political parties (Nabi, Ali, & Shafiq, 2023).

In AJK's history, Nabila Arshad stands out as the first woman to establish a political party, the Kashmir Peoples Democratic Party, marking a milestone in women's leadership. These developments, particularly in the 21st century, reflect a positive image of women's politics in AJK. Yet many challenges remain. Women's political empowerment continues to be hindered by patriarchal structures, cultural traditions, and systemic barriers within party politics. This study therefore uses patriarchy theory to analyse barriers to women's political participation in AJK's democratic process (Matloob, Shabbir, & Saher, 2020; Younas, Aftab, & Nasir, 2024).

Theoretical Concept

This study is grounded in patriarchy theory, a key strand of feminist scholarship developed by Sylvia Walby (1989). The term patriarchy derives from the Greek word patriarkhia, meaning "rule of the father." It denotes a socially constructed system in which men hold primary authority over women,

positioning women as dependent, passive, and less knowledgeable than men. Walby's framework identifies patriarchy as a set of social structures and practices through which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women.

In the context of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), patriarchy theory explains the limited political role of women. Women remain in subordinate positions because political power is concentrated within male-dominated parties and institutions. In AJK, this inequality is most evident in political parties, which act as gatekeepers by controlling candidate selection, largely confining women to reserved seats, and preventing independent candidacy (Matloob, Shabbir, & Saher, 2020). Party hegemony thus curtails women's electoral rights and reinforces male dominance. Beyond party politics, prevailing social norms cast women primarily as household managers rather than public political actors, reinforcing the notion that politics is a male domain. Since elections were introduced in AJK in 1970, the total number of women candidates has remained below 50 throughout the region's electoral history (Nabi, Ali, & Shafiq, 2023). The consistently low presence of women reflects the persistence of patriarchal structures that constrain women's agency.

Reserved seats for women were introduced under the Interim Constitution Act of 1974, with five seats allocated since 1975. However, these numbers have not increased, despite women constituting more than half of the population. According to the AJK Bureau of Statistics (2024), the female population stands at 2,183,063, compared with 2,205,677 males. From 1985 to the present, no additional seats have been proposed for women, highlighting structural stagnation in political empowerment. Reserved seats often benefit women from influential families, while qualified women without strong political backgrounds remain excluded (Younas, Aftab, & Nasir, 2024). Thus, patriarchy theory provides a critical lens for understanding how institutional structures, cultural norms, and political practices collectively sustain male dominance and restrict women's political development in AJK.

Research Question

What are the societal and political factors that affect women's political engagement in AJK?

Research Design and Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology to investigate how social structures influence women's gender roles in politics within Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). The research is founded on interpretive and contextual analysis, emphasising lived experiences, narratives, and socio-cultural dynamics over quantitative metrics. Data were collected from a variety of primary and secondary sources, including academic books, journal articles, newspaper reports, publications from women's research centres, and interviews with activists. These sources offer valuable insights into the socio-cultural and institutional factors affecting women's political involvement. The interviews, in particular, capture perspectives that shed light on the obstacles women face, the strategies they adopt to navigate political environments, and their resilience amidst structural challenges. This qualitative approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of how women's political consciousness is shaped by intersecting factors such as tradition, institutional practices, and community norms. Records from the Legislative Assembly and the Election Commission of AJK serve as contextual references, enhancing the credibility of the narratives and situating them within larger institutional frameworks. By employing qualitative evidence, the study underscores the complexity of women's political participation, highlighting the dynamic interplay of agency, culture, and structure in defining gender roles in politics.

Findings Emerged from the Qualitative Data Analysis

1. Political Parties and Their Hegemony: In Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), political parties have historically been the primary forces shaping women's political status. Male elites within these parties largely determine the roles and positions assigned to women, thereby limiting their autonomy in political decision-making. Women affiliated with political parties are often given

limited choices, with their participation mediated through patriarchal structures within party politics (Matloob, Shabbir, & Saher, 2021).

Between 1985 and 2006, only a few women secured positions in the AJK Legislative Assembly, largely because of their ties to party elites rather than independent political agency. Although some women demonstrated party loyalty, they were rarely nominated as candidates. A notable exception was the 2006 elections, when Norin Arif, excluded from her party's ticket, contested independently and won a seat. Similarly, Farzana Yaqoob, daughter of President Yaqoob Khan, was elected to the Assembly and later appointed Minister for Social Welfare (Bashir & Firdous, 2024).

The trajectory of women's political participation in AJK reflects both structural constraints and moments of breakthrough. The first democratic elections in 1970 marked the entry of Begum Raja Haider into the Assembly. Following the 1974 Interim Constitution Act, five seats were reserved for women, institutionalising their presence while reinforcing tokenism. From 1975 to 1985, under civil-military governments, women's representation remained limited. When elections resumed in 1985, five women were included in the Assembly, yet their roles were largely dependent on party patronage (Bashir & Firdous, 2024).

Throughout the late 20th century, women's political participation remained sporadic and conditional. Party loyalty often dictated their inclusion, with many women serving only for the duration of a particular assembly's tenure. In 1988, Begum K. H. Khurshid contested a by-election following her husband's death, Mr K. H. Khurshid, but was unsuccessful, reflecting the challenges women faced in securing electoral legitimacy independent of male lineage. This pattern underscores the hegemony of political parties in AJK, where women's political empowerment has been constrained by patriarchal norms, dynastic politics, and structural limitations within party systems (Matloob et al., 2021; Bashir & Firdous, 2024).

2. Patriarchal Structure and Women of AJK: Patriarchy remains deeply embedded in AJK's

socio-political fabric, mirroring broader South Asian traditions. Cultural norms and patriarchal patterns of thought reinforce male supremacy, restricting women's agency in both public and private spheres (Khan, 2014). Women's participation in politics is often stigmatised as taboo, with only a handful of liberal thinkers historically supporting their inclusion. Most societal actors continue to confine women to household roles, leaving those who aspire to political engagement without strong family or elite support. Thus, the patriarchal system remains a defining influence on women's political participation and role in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). Electoral discrimination remains a major hurdle, restricting women's political independence and reinforcing their dependence on male-dominated structures (Rakha, 2016). While the essence of electoral empowerment lies in the free exercise of the right to vote and the merit-based election of representatives, women in AJK have often been denied this autonomy.

The AJK Legislative Assembly, the most influential political institution, has historically nominated women based on personal affiliations or party loyalty rather than merit (Matloob, Shabbir, & Saher, 2021). From 1985 onwards, the fixed allocation of five reserved seats for women reflected tokenism rather than genuine empowerment. These seats, largely filled by party elites, offered limited scope for women to advocate for broader political rights.

Electoral records highlight the marginalisation of women. Between 1970 and 2001, almost no women contested elections independently. Even when women were included, their participation was often symbolic. For instance, Mrs K. H. Khurshid contested the 1988 by-election following her husband's death but failed to win, underscoring the reliance on male lineage for legitimacy. Similarly, Norin Arif broke patriarchal barriers in 2006 by contesting independently after being denied a party ticket, becoming one of the few women to win a seat without elite patronage (Younas, 2024). Later, Nabila Arshad Khan, initially affiliated with the Jammu and Kashmir Peoples Party (JKPP), founded the Jammu and Kashmir Democratic Party in 2016 after facing

intra-party discrimination, reflecting women's struggle to carve out autonomous political spaces. The persistence of patriarchal practices is evident in voter registration. Reports indicate that nearly 300,000 women remained unregistered on voter lists, depriving them of basic electoral rights (Nabi, 2023). In many areas, male family members cast votes on women's behalf, reinforcing proxy participation over independent agency. Despite a gradual increase in female candidates from 3 in 2011 to 20 in 2021, the overall trajectory shows that women's political empowerment remains constrained by patriarchal norms, dynastic politics, and structural discrimination. Ultimately, the history of women's electoral participation in AJK reveals that reserved seats and symbolic nominations have done little to dismantle patriarchal hegemony. Genuine empowerment requires not only representation but also autonomy in decision-making, independent candidacy, and equal access to electoral processes (Matloob et al., 2021; Nabi, 2023; Younas, 2024).

3. Act 1974 and Women's Political Dependency:

The Interim Constitution Act of 1974 marked a turning point in the political history of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). Although the Act ostensibly offered equal opportunities to all candidates meeting the criteria for candidacy, its provisions reflected a patriarchal bias. For the first time, five seats were reserved for women in the Legislative Assembly, yet the Act did not establish proportional quotas or mechanisms to ensure substantive representation (Government of Azad Jammu & Kashmir, 1974). Instead, women's inclusion was largely symbolic, reinforcing dependence on male-dominated party structures.

From 1947 until the first elections in 1970, AJK was governed under interim arrangements, including the War Council and the rules of business. The introduction of the electoral system and the 1974 Act institutionalised women's presence but failed to dismantle patriarchal barriers. In practice, many women nominated to reserved seats lacked political experience, serving more as "guest appearances" in the Assembly than as empowered representatives (Awan, Syed, & Farooq, 2021). By the 2021 elections, only three

women secured seats through adult franchise, underscoring the limited impact of reserved seats on genuine empowerment.

4. Economic Aspects and Political Dependency

Economic structures further entrench women's dependency. In AJK, medicine and teaching are considered the most "appropriate" professions for women, while political participation remains marginalised. Despite higher female literacy and enrolment in higher education than men, women's representation in professional and political fields is constrained by family restrictions and party patronage. Even when women enter politics, they face financial discrimination, including a lack of funds for election campaigns (Gillani, 2019). Cases such as Mrs Shahida Saghir, who entered politics after her husband's death and was appointed Minister for Social Welfare despite limited political experience, illustrate how familial ties and party loyalty outweigh merit and expertise. This pattern reflects the broader influence of capital and patronage in AJK politics, where allegations of vote-buying and elite dominance remain prevalent (Awan et al., 2021).

5. Political Parties and Ideology: AJK's political landscape is shaped by diverse ideological orientations, including pro-Pakistan, religious, and self-determination/separatist movements. While some parties include women in their networks, intra-party discrimination often forces women to leave or form new political groups. Following the 2021 elections, women also participated in the activities of the Joint Awami Action Committee (JAAC), signalling gradual but contested progress in political activism.

6. Social media and Women's Empowerment:

Social media has emerged as a crucial instrument for influencing women in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), WhatsApp, and other digital networks provide women access to political and social knowledge at local, national, and international levels. These platforms facilitate communication beyond their immediate localities, thereby broadening their awareness and political

consciousness (Kashmir Institute of International Relations, 2016). Audio-visual content additionally supports women with limited formal education, providing accessible means of learning and engagement. Nonetheless, social media also presents challenges. Online harassment, the fear of viral shaming, and abusive behaviour by political leaders towards women advocating for their rights remain significant concerns. These negative aspects may deter women's participation and reinforce patriarchal control. Furthermore, debates, such as those concerning the 12 refugee seats in AJK, exemplify how political disputes intersect with digital activism, occasionally exacerbating instability within the political environment.

Recommendations

To mitigate patriarchal influence and strengthen women's political participation in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, several recommendations arise from the findings. First, the reserved quota for women must be expanded beyond five seats to reflect their share of the population, approximately 51 per cent. Universal education should be guaranteed, and women's political development should be strengthened through institutional support. Male decision-makers must be encouraged to recognise the importance of women's presence in politics, while safe zones should be established to encourage women to enter politics as a profession. Women legislators should be granted full funding for development projects, and the masculine language in the 1974 Act should be amended to reflect gender inclusivity. Political consciousness among women can be promoted through education and awareness campaigns, while intra-party elections should be institutionalised to reduce elite control. Political parties must mandate quotas for women candidates in general elections, and women should be encouraged to contest local body elections rather than rely solely on nominations. Introducing electronic voting systems would facilitate women's participation in remote areas, while political education and awareness should be promoted at both village and city levels. Family heads should be trained on the importance of women's votes, and pressrooms and

media platforms should be used to engage women in political knowledge and discourse. Together, these measures would help dismantle patriarchal barriers and create a more inclusive and representative political system.

Conclusion

Patriarchy negatively affects women's political development in AJK, creating structural imbalances in society. From ancient to modern times, patriarchal norms have restricted women's autonomy and political agency. In South Asia, including AJK, male domination remains deeply entrenched, with women often confined to household roles and denied equal opportunities in politics. In AJK, women's political participation has historically been symbolic, dependent, and controlled by male family heads.

Between 1970 and 2006, only two women contested elections independently, underscoring the depth of patriarchal barriers. Even after 2000, despite higher female literacy and enrolment in higher education, political decision-making remained under male authority. A measurable shift occurred after 2011, with the number of candidates rising to 3 in 2011, 8 in 2016, and 20 in 2021. This increase suggests that legal frameworks, such as the AJK State Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment, and gradual social change have begun to weaken patriarchal control.

Nevertheless, women's representation remains low relative to men's, and their political choices continue to be shaped by family and community norms. Patriarchy has historically confined women to passive roles, limiting independent participation and leadership. Although recent increases in female candidates signal progress, substantive empowerment requires dismantling the cultural and institutional constraints that sustain male dominance. Ensuring women's equal participation is essential for representative and legitimate political outcomes in AJK.

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