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Political Analysis of Women Poll Workers Personal Challenges during General Elections-2024 in Pakistan: An exploratory study conducted in Malakand

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Abstract

Women poll workers play a vital role in conducting free and fair elections in Pakistan. The present study explored the personal challenges faced by women poll workers in Malakand. The study used qualitative research design with purposive sampling to conduct seven interviews with women poll workers. The study explored that women poll workers performed their elections duties as per the standards of Election Commission of Pakistan election rules in General Elections-2024. However, some of their personal issues were explored which hinder them to perform their official duty during elections. The study explored physical health, psychological issues with participants. Gender role was also explored as a personal challenge to them. In the study locale security concerns of women poll workers are also explored. The study concluded that women poll workers personal challenges should be considered and logistic support should be provided to enhance the women poll workers efficiency during elections duty.

Keywords: Women, Poll Workers, Elections, Personal Challenges, Malakand, Pakistan

Introduction

Election policies in Pakistan are guided by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), a state organization under mandate from the Constitution to organize general and local elections. The ECP is put in place under Article 218 of the Constitution of Pakistan for providing free and fair elections by organizing political parties, monitoring voters' rolls, and settling disputes during elections (ECP, 2023).

Pakistan uses a mixed electoral system with both first-past-the-post and proportional representation. Regardless of the electoral transparency provision under law, electoral fraud, political violence, and gender inequality in voting are prevalent (Shah, 2022).

The ECP has introduced techniques like biometric authentication of voters and electronic voting machines, but these are still being used irregularly because of logistic and political grounds (Ahmed & Naseer, 2021).

Election officials are the central players in election administration, whose roles vary from conducting polling processes to authenticating vote counts. Election



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officials comprise election commissioners, returning officers, presiding officers, and polling personnel. The election commission, which is an independent body in the majority of democratic countries, is tasked with developing electoral regulations, maintaining electoral laws, and managing the general electoral process (Birch, 2011). The autonomy of such officials is necessary to avoid manipulation and impartiality in carrying out elections.

Election officials carry out a number of duties prior to, during, and subsequent to the electoral process. Prior to elections, authorities clean voter rolls, manage polling station logistics, and conduct voter education programs to increase public information. During Election Day, officers man polling stations, arrange efficient voting operations, and protect compliance with electoral law. Following having carried out elections, officers tally votes, certify results, and settle electoral disputes (Norris, 2014). Free and fair elections in a democratic regime are facilitated by an efficient system of governance with the help of legal tools and institutional balances.

The ECP appoints returning officers (ROs), district returning officers (DROs), and presiding officers (POs) to manage different aspects of the electoral process. The DROs manage elections at the district level, while ROs manage the process within one constituency, e.g., accepting nomination papers, scrutinizing candidates, and counting election returns. POs and poll officials conduct polls at polling stations; keep voting procedures, and count votes (Handbook for Election Officials, 2022). The most important step of the general elections is the polling day when voters cast their votes at allocated polling stations before election officers. Security forces like police and paramilitary troops are deployed to preserve law and order and avoid electoral malpractices. Domestic and foreign observers monitor the process to assess its credibility and transparency. After closing the polling process, votes are tabulated and initial results announced. The final result is produced by the ECP and decides the dispute beforehand before officially announcing the representatives (ECP Report, 2023).

In order to maintain the purity of the elections, the ECP uses several mechanisms, i.e., technology like biometric verification and electronic voting machines (EVMs) on a pilot basis. Political parties, candidates, and electors are given guidance in order to stop electoral malpractice. The commission can disqualify those candidates who have been convicted of election law offences (Election Act, 2017). The ECP continues to be a major player in the building of democracy in Pakistan through the enforcement of election codes, improving voter education, and making electoral processes transparent. In the face of political pressure, security threats, and logistical complexities, the commission is interested in keeping the democratic process burning in the country (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Even with the benefits of democratic elections, electoral violence, gerrymandering, and voter intimidation still occur in most states (Schedler, 2002). The rest of the world also suffers from not abiding by democratic principles because of authoritarianism, corruption, and fragile institutions. Elections in hybrid regimes are normally manipulated for the aim of legitimizing authoritarian power instead of conducting actual democratic elections (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Electoral integrity protection demands wide-ranging reforms such as electoral monitoring, legal protection, and civic education programs (Hyde, (2011). In the present study researchers explored personal challenges to women poll workers during general election 2024 in the study locale, Malakand, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.



Methods

Qualitative research is an inductive analytical approach which is applied to study human behavior, thoughts, actions, events or social processes based on non-statistical information (Creswell, 2014; Kothari, 2004). The objective of qualitative research is to provide profound and detailed understanding of people's daily life, perception, or social or cultural process. The researchers used a qualitative approach in the study in an effort to capture the lived realities of women poll workers in District Malakand of the 2024 General Elections. The researchers used interpretivist paradigm to explore the women poll workers experiences during election duties. The researchers developed an interview guide after informal interaction with women poll workers and extensive literature review. The interview guide covered the personal challenges faced by women poll workers including their health issues, mobility concerns, and gender role in domestic sphere. The principal researcher conducted interviews with seven women poll workers in the study locale. The researchers recorded verbal informed consent to conduct interviews and explore their experiences. **The data collection process is initiated and completed systematically to gather qualitative data through face-to-face interviews with purposively selected women poll workers. The researchers ensured the confidentiality and privacy of the participants during data gathering and discussion. The researchers selected women teachers as one of the poll workers in general elections-2024 therefore the interviews were conducted in their duty hours in schools. Thematic analysis was completed to analyze the experiences of the participants. The researchers used six steps in thematic analysis of results which is an accepted and proven method for pattern recognition and interpretation of qualitative data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method of analysis is used because it provides a systematic method of exploring participants' experiences with flexibility to capture the unexpected (Nowell, 2017).**

Results and Discussions

Theme: Personal challenges to women poll workers in general elections-2024 in district Malakand

In the present research study the personal challenges of the women poll workers were analyzed and discussed. The personal challenges included physical health, family structure and decision making, personal security concerns, employment, and gender roles. In this research paper the personal challenges were explored during interviews with the women poll workers.

In interviews with study participants it was explored that some of the respondents faced physical health issues as their personal challenge during general election-2024 in district Malakand. That affected their well-being and election duties. It was discussed that in some cases the employed women are ill with chronic disease and they are only performing their daily duties in their designated schools, but due to election duties they compromise their personal physical health (Payne, 2010). In this connection during discussion one of the participants shared her own experiences about her chronic diseases.

"I am diabetic and initially was reluctant to take on the high-pressure job, fearing that I might not be able to perform at my optimal level of functioning due to my



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disease. Planning election duties against managing health complications was a massive burden, making me question whether it was possible to expect those with medical conditions to perform efficiently under such stressful conditions” (Pr.O1). Maternal health and pregnancy is a normal state of married women during their official duties but they face challenges when they are nominated to perform election duties in some stations which are far away from the residential area of the women (Bhalotra, 2019; Grossman, 2009). During interview with a poll worker women it was explored and a woman shared her views about maternal health care complications which are considered as one of the barriers to perform election duties.

“Health was the biggest challenge, I have a severe knee problem and post-childbirth complications that physically disabled me from sitting for long hours and traveling to a remote polling station” (PO5).

“While I was in the third trimester of pregnancy, I had a very tough time sitting for hours together during the voting and counting process. It was also very tough for me to travel to far-off polling stations in my condition” (PO7).

A participant explained the physical challenges she faced during general election-2024 duties. In the physical challenges their health was discussed and mobility issues were contextualized in the study locale (Javed, 2021). It was explored that some of the women poll workers gone through major physical surgeries and they were recommended for bed rest however ECP compel them to perform their election duties. One of the participants shared her opinions.

“Health was a worrying aspect, I consider my own experience after I underwent lower back surgery, which actually made it so difficult for me to sit for many hours or move to far-off places.

It was highlighted in interviews that the physical and mental wellbeing concerns of electoral staff, especially those with pre-existing conditions. This is consistent with research on the health consequences of very stressful professions. High-stress occupations, particularly those involving prolonged working hours and physical labor, have been shown to exacerbate underlying diseases and result in burnout, as a study by (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) pointed out.

It is explored in interviews with women poll workers that **security concerns** was their personal challenge during general elections-2024 in district Malakand. The study area is already experienced militancy and the local officials were threatened by the militants affiliated with various militant groups. It was also explored that due to law and order situation in the study locale schools and colleges were remain closed and the mobility of the teachers were restricted (Naqvi, 2012). Similarly, in the study are due to law and order situation it is hard to perform election duties as it is experienced that contesting candidates are also a threat for women poll workers during general elections.

It was explored in interviews with two participants;

“Security concerns were a major issue; for instance I was open and at risk due to the lack of transport and security once the polling hours were over. Stranded with no mobile networks, I spent an hour in a chowkidar's house; he was unfamiliar to me, making me vulnerable to harassment and security threat” (APr.O2).

Another study explained (Giné & Mansuri, 2018) the political participation of rural women in Pakistan and identifies patriarchal ideology, restricted movement, and insecurity as the primary hindrances. The result supports the evidence of the interviewee's experience further solidifying the premise that election incumbents



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among women voters, candidates, or ballot participants are under structural threat excluding their direct participation.

Another participant shared her experience that;

“The experience of polling day left a lasting impression on my working attitude towards election duty. It was evident that the day was tainted by security breaches, beginning when influential people visited the polling station, demanding that women vote there even though they were registered elsewhere. These individuals refused to move to their allocated polling stations, and when the security guards and women poll workers also refused to bend to their wishes, they opened fire, triggering a chaos that sent shockwaves of fear through the female staff” (PO3).

In interview with participants it was discussed that a respondent faced **gender bias** as a personal challenge from voter side, during polling day in 2024 general elections in district Malakand. The study locale is patriarchal in social structure and men are the decision makers in domestic and public sphere. Various gender roles are defined for men and women both in domestic sphere and public sphere. During elections it was explored that women poll workers were not considered much responsible due to their gender role (Charles, 2020; Darcy, 1994). During elections gender discrimination is experienced by women poll workers in terms of lack of facilities for women poll workers i.e. security staff on women poll stations is less in number, there is no separate washroom for women poll workers, and for their children there was no space allocated (Cantú, 2017). It was also explored that male political workers also entered in women polling booths and some harassment issues were also occurred which were under-reported due to social stigma and family restrictions.

As one of the respondents shared;

“In my opinion, being a presiding officer as a woman at times proves to be difficult because those at polling stations, including polling agents, party supporters, and the electorate, react to and follow instructions by male presiding officers more easily than the females” (Pr.O4).

Recent studies in Frontiers in Political Science look at political leadership decisions on gender bias, and it reveals that even though citizens do not necessarily consciously exclude women candidates, there are implicit prejudices and structural issues involved, which strive to underrepresent women (Frontiers , 2022) .

Likewise, in the election administration, women also face some shades of subtle prejudice that undermine their influence when they are no less capable than the men they are working with (Kimball, 2009).

Profile of the Participants

Statement	Participants response (N=7)	
	Presiding Officer (n=3)	Polling Officer (n=4)
Age of the participant in complete year	Pr. O 1: 47 years A.Pr. O 2: 27 years Pr. O 3: 58 years	PO 1 45 years PO 2: 50 years PO 3: : 54 years



Employment place (School/College/University name)	Pr. O 1: GGHS Kharkai A.Pr. O 2: GGMS Piran Pr. O 3: GGHS Mehrđi	PO 4: 37 years PO 1: GGPS Mehrđi PO 2: GGPS Mehrđi PO 3: GGPS No 1 Sakhakot PO 4: GGHS Qaldara
Marital status of the participant	Pr. O 1: Married A.Pr. O 2: Single Pr. O 3: Married	PO 1: Married PO 2: Married PO 3: Married PO 4: Married
Having any chronic disease	Pr. O 1: Diabetic A.Pr. O 2: No Pr. O 3: No	PO 1: Osteoarthritis (Degenerative Joint disease) PO 2: Lower back surgery PO 3: No PO 4: No
Type of family (Nuclear/Joint/extended)	Pr. O 1: Joint A.Pr. O 2: Nuclear Pr. O 3: Nuclear	PO 1: Nuclear PO 2: Nuclear PO 3: Nuclear PO 4: Joint
Number of living children (if any)	Pr. O 1: 1 A.Pr. O 2: - Pr. O 3: 2	PO 1: 3 PO 2: 2 PO 3: 3 PO 4: 3
Qualification/Education of the participant	Pr. O 1: M.A A.Pr. O 2: Mphil Pr. O 3: Mphil	PO 1: M.A PO 2: M.A PO 3: B.A PO 4: Mphil
Length of service in years	Pr. O 1: 20 years A.Pr. O 2: 3.5 years Pr. O 3: 30 years	PO 1: 16 years PO 2: 16 years PO 3: 36 years PO 4: 6 years
Performed elections duties other than general election- 2024	Pr. O 1: Yes A.Pr. O 2: Yes Pr. O 3: Yes	PO 1: Yes PO 2: Yes PO 3: Yes PO 4: Yes
Received training from the ECP	Pr. O 1: Yes A.Pr. O 2: Yes Pr. O 3: Yes	PO 1: Yes PO 2: Yes PO 3: Yes PO 4: Yes

Denotation: Pr. O: Presiding Officer, A. Pr. O: Assistant Presiding Officer, PO: Polling Officer

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study concluded that women poll workers play a vital role in conduction of free and fair elections in the country however they faced various personal



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challenges during 2024 General Election duties. The study concluded that women poll workers personal challenges are related to their mental health, physical health, mobility and gender roles assigned to women in the domestic and public sphere. The study concluded that major surgery and some chronic illness are the physical challenges to women poll workers, while due to subordinate position in the family and gender discrimination women physical mobility was restricted to perform election duties. The study concluded that security concerns are also restrict women poll workers to perform election duties and in some cases women poll workers were harassed with no reporting due to social stigma. The study recommended that The Election Commission of Pakistan should manage logistic support to women poll workers to avoid security issues and to facilitate women poll workers with physical health concerns. The ECP should arrange facilities for women poll workers in polling stations and polling booth during elections. It is also recommended that a prior consent should be taken from women poll workers before nominated them for election duties. It is also recommended that ECP should coordinate with security personnel to protect women poll workers in case of any incidence.

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