


Shahida Aman¹, Muhammad Ayub Jan², Muhammad Zubair³, Shehzad Ali⁴

1. Professor and Chairperson, Department of Political Science, University of Peshawar.
2. Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Peshawar.
3. Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Peshawar.
4. PhD Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Peshawar.

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Corresponding Author:
Muhammad Zubair

Email: mzubairzaib@uop.edu.pk
License:


Abstract: *One of the most difficult issues faced by women in the newly merged districts of tribal areas is the problem of exclusionary religious discourses that has roots in the rigid patriarchal cultural practices of the area, which results in creating a wide gulf in the public life of the women in these areas. In this research study, we attempt to discuss different discursive practices that are common in the tribal areas and that create obstacles to women's participation in public and social spaces. The prevailing traditional narrative holds that women are not allowed by religion and cultural practices to go out in public and should remain within the four walls of the house, which limits their meaningful participation in public life. During our discussions and surveys, many female participants openly questioned the existing conditions, offering alternative explanations and reasons for their lack of voice regarding their rights. A substantial number of women claim that men are influenced by the clergy through their speeches and sermons in the context of their attitude towards their womenfolk. The participants acknowledge the role of misinterpretation and the underlying power structures that sustain this whole process of dominance at the cultural level. As informed by the participants, these clergy are considered the final authority in very sensitive issues, such as honor killings and other oppressive interpretations rooted in culture. Women raise questions about the mistreatment they receive at the hands of their men and demand upon the state to protect them from oppressive norms and extremist religious doctrines.*

Introduction¹

Most of the studies on Pakistan's former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) analyse gender mainstreaming in the light of the legal and governance reforms introduced when the belt was mainstreamed in 2018. They analyse women's exclusion from traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, such as Jirga's and from the more formal institutions such as commissions and legislative bodies as core sources of marginalization of women. The poor socio-economic conditions of the tribal

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women have been cited as one of the reasons for their backwardness. The literacy rate for the tribal women stands at a dismal 3 % which averages far behind the national rate of 43 % (F. Saeed & S. Khan, 2017). Other scholars blame the traditional and custom based practices of 'brides money', locally named swara or sarpaisay as being antithetical to established notions of justice and fairness, the practices of purdah (gender segregation) and nang (honour) and the low literacy rate and high school dropout rates responsible for the entry barriers tribal women face in the employment market (N. A. Khan, 2012; Z. R. Mohsin., 2013). In another study, the retrogressive impacts of decades of militancy, violence and displacements have been cited as reasons that have kept the tribal women's socio-economic position as backward (N. Naseer, 2015). A related aspect is the militant bombing of the girl's school which has pushed back female education by decades (S. S. G. Khattak, 2018). The lack of health facilities is a further setback to the tribal women as some studies cite only around 280 LHVs working among a populations of around 1.8 million (A. K. Wazir & M. Z. Khan, 2014). Such a stark reality is more troublesome for a population that hardly accesses world outside their tribal areas for access to health facilities, especially in the urban centres of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The legal and administrative landscape of former FATA in the form of governance structures maintained under the FCR are also blamed for reinforcing the tribal, customary and patriarchal structures and negatively influencing women's status there (S. Khan and Samina, 2009) and for failing to provide any legal and juridical protection to women in former FATA (N. A. Khan, 2012) as the principle of Collective Security under FCR ensured that even women were made to pay for crimes and actions that were never committed by them. It was only on the contention of the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) that the President of Pakistan used his authority under Article 247 of the Constitution to extended legal protections to the women by excluding women, children and people over 65 years of age from the principle of Collective Security (S. Khan & Samina, 2009).

The FCR is blamed as anti-women by some scholars (N. H. K. Mehsud, M. Zubair & S. Hussan, 2016) as women were literally absent from the legal framework set up under this law. Most notable among the legal provision of the FCR were the sections 8 and 11 which referred legal cases to Jirga's unrepresented by women (F. Yousaf, & S. Farrukhzad, 2020). Therefore, scholars (A. K. Wazir & M. Z. Khan, 2014), suggested legal reforms to improve women's legal position in tribal areas. As a change the recommendation was that the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 1997 needed to be extended to the former FATA and the recommendations of the UN Rapporteur on Violence against Women needed to be adopted for initiating a meaningful change. Other studies, including Yousaf and Farrukhzad (2020) also identified this critical absence of women from dispute resolution bodies in FATA, including Jirga and the violation of tribal women's legal status as a result. Scholars (N. Naseer, 2015), lamented not only tribal women's absence from the Jirga, but also her nonexistence in the various legislative bodies and the different commissions that recommended legal changes to the legislative assemblies. Some studies (H. Iqbal & S. Khan, 2014; F. Yousaf, 2018) primarily blamed the post partition government of Pakistan for continuing with a Colonial era law, which in turn operationalized and amplified the existing patriarchal power configurations in the tribal areas, and the continuation of the FCR was designed to perpetuate the same exclusion (N. H. K. Mahsud., M. Zubair., & S. Hussan, 2016). This post partition continuation of the FCR ensured that while in other parts of Pakistan, women's legal-political and social status improved, for the tribal women, it remained the same.

Some studies (N. A. Shinwari, 2012) based on Focus Group Discussions held with the tribal women also entailed the view that there was a dire need to change the legal status of former FATA in order to improve the legal-political and social status of the tribal women, however, the idea about how such a

set-up might look like was too early for a study conducted in 2011. Though some studies that followed (Z. Z. Naqvi and S. Riaz, 2015), there were some articulation of women's inclusion in the decision making and adjudicating bodies in former FATA, such as the Jirga's and for the greater mainstreaming of tribal women in other administrative structures of the tribal areas. Sarfraz Khan & Samina (2009) research findings based on a qualitative study in Kurram and Khyber also highlighted women's absence from former FATA's institutional structures and from serious conversation of reform processes in the region. The extension of Political Parties Act to tribal areas was considered by scholars (Altaf-Ullah, 2015) as insufficient to remove some of the draconian laws in the FCR, such as those focused on Collective Responsibility and therefore it was considered important to extend full judicial and constitutional rights to the women of FATA. The attention was drawn to the Section 30 of the FCR which was left untouched by the reforms of 2011 (N. H. K. Mehsud, M. Zubair & S. Hussan, 2016) and therefore, there were calls to permanently dismantle the system of the FCR and to include the tribal belt in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as merged districts.

The passage of the 25th Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan, and the merger of the Tribal Areas with the Province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018 was welcomed as a first step in the direction of abolishing women's exclusionary status in the former FATA. In this connection, scholars (S. Ijaz & M. H. Jafri, 2021) highlighted the serious attempts on the part of the provincial government to restore and rehabilitate some 345 schools in the merged districts in post-merger period, for which and for strengthening the educational foundations there, the government also allocated some 3 billion rupees; steps seen as positively impacting the overall and women's educational enrolment in the area. Others (M. Orakzai & A. Ali, 2023) taking the example of the extension of the EMA-Educational Monitoring Authority to the merged districts argue that such steps will ensure teacher's presence in the classrooms and also the creation of parent-teacher councils. However, the study highlights the diverse challenges to mainstreaming former FATA's education system, including poor infrastructure, financial constraints, retrogressive cultural practices and the never ending conflict scenario.

There are some scholars (N. Naseer, 2022) who emphasize that some of the progress in the context of reforming former FATAs institutional structures also stemmed from the efforts made by civil society actors, including women's rights activists' struggle for advocating tribal women's rights in the region. By this time, other scholars (B. Khan, S. Ali & A. Khan, 2023) also called upon the greater inclusion of women in the reform processes to make it more representative. Women's absence from legal and administrative reforms is also connected to conflict, insecurity and militancy in the region. Since tribal women are denied a public space, their view of the ongoing militancy and conflict in the region is also myopic as asserted by some scholars (S. Dawar, N. Bahadur, I. Nyborg & N. Elahi, 2020), who also claim that mostly women in their study group blamed the declining religious morality for the perpetuation of armed conflict in the region. Therefore, there is need to mainstream tribal women by focusing on uplifting their educational status, especially raising political education and awareness among them.

One of the steps praised by the scholars for improving women's mainstreaming in the merged districts was the extension of the Local Government Act to these districts (R. Khan & S. Hussain, 2021); their argument was that these institutions by emphasizing women's participation in the affairs of the local government from their homes was perfectly attuned to the cultural practices of the region. In a similar vain, some scholars (S. Fayaz, S. Gul & A. K. Khattak, 2021) also argue that the 25th Amendment will improved tribal women's political representation in the provincial assembly by allowing them at least 4 seats in the female reserved quota. And others (H. Khan., M. Tariq & M. Ilyas, 2023) feel optimistic that the governments proposed 10 year plan for the merged districts also places importance on tribal

women's mainstreaming.

There have been however, very few indepth and academic studies on how far merger has helped streamline and improve tribal women's position. One of the studies conducted in the Bajaur district found around 55 % of the women respondents agreeing that merger did led to some improvement in their educational status (B. Khan & I. Khan 2023). Some of the journalistic studies (M. A. Khan, 2023), however express their dissatisfaction with little space merger had opened socially for the women of the tribal areas; there is also criticism on the role of the various women commissions that he claimed worked on paper only. Others (N. Khan, 2023) also lament lack of progress on women's educational and property rights in the newly merged districts. Other newer studies, criticize continuation of the British colonial practices by the state of Pakistan (S. Khan and M. Zubair, 2024; N. H. K. Mahsud., M. S. Ahmad., & Wasai, 2021) particularly the legal and administrative systems established under the Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR), which worked against women's interests. Therefore the assertion that women needed to be included in the reform processes in former FATA to make it more representative (A. Khan., M. Khan., Latifullah., & W. Khan, 2023).

Some studies conducted in post-merger period provide a mixed analysis on how women have fared since merger. Studies (S. Ijaz., & M. H. Jafri, 2021; M. U. Orakzai., & A. Ali, 2023; Khan & Hussain, 2021; T. Munir, 2025) reflect a more positive implication of merger on improving the political status of women, their inclusion in the political arena, their educational status, and participatory politics. Studies also praise the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government for taking steps in bridging the literacy gap for the females in the merged districts and providing opportunities for social development (S. Ijaz and M. H. Jafri, 2021; M. U. Orakzai., & A. Ali, 2023); all of this to improve their political empowerment. The proposed 10-year development plan of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government for the merged districts is also supposedly important policy document that will improve tribal women's socio-economic status (H. U. Khan., M. Tariq., & M. Ilyas., 2023). Merged district's Women's inclusion in the formal governance spaces through their reserved seats in the provincial legislature and their participation in the local government politics through extension of the Local Government Act to the merged districts are steps that will provide them with empowerment and mainstreaming opportunities (S. Fayaz., S. Gul., A.K. Khattak., 2021; R. Khan., & S. Hussain., 2021)

The literature review suggests an important gap in the study of women's rights in the newly merged districts of the erstwhile FATA region. There seems to be a lack of indepth and rigorous academic research on how post-merger situation impacted women's position in the former tribal belt. And what issues and factors hinder the effective accomplishment of the goal of women's mainstreaming in former FATA. In this paper, based on our qualitative and quantitative research in all the 7 tribal districts, we try to highlight how the religious discourse coupled with customary debates and practices poses a significant threat to the mainstreaming of the tribal women in the merged districts.

Methodology

The research design chosen for this study was a mixed-methods design. Since the research questions were exploratory and analytical, therefore, mixed methods, including quantitative surveys and semi-structured qualitative interviews were undertaken in all the seven districts of NMTDs. Female and male data enumerators from University of Peshawar and representing their respective districts collected the data from these 7 agencies between December 2023 to February 2024. These enumerators collected around 30 surveys from each district through a convenient sampling technique, which brought the total number to 210. The female survey participants had been divided into different categories, including employed, unemployed, educated, uneducated, married and unmarried women based in the tribal

districts. Quantitative surveys primarily focused on understanding and exploring tribal women's perspectives on the reform processes, their status in pre- and post-reform period, the main hindrances to their meaningful participation in public life and challenges thereof. The quantitative data was analyzed through SPSS software.

For qualitative primary data, semi-structured Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with different categories of participants, including: tribal masharan, maliks, religious leaders and public representatives; around 20 interviews representing all these groups were in each were held from each of the in tribal women; common tribesmen; and governmental and non-governmental/ civil society representatives. In each of these 4 categories, 20 interviews were conducted; around a total of 80 interviews with male and female participants from all the 7 merged districts. The participants were selected through purposive and convenient sampling techniques. The nature of the interview was semi-structured and in-depth. The participants were asked to share their expertise as well as lived experience. Interviews were audio-taped after taking proper permissions from the respondents. Interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed to draw findings and conclusions.

Findings and Discussion

Religious Discourse and Perception about Women's Rights in Bajaur

In the Bajaur merged district, we see divergence of opinion on the question of how far the religious discourse is dominated by the clergy to deny women their due rights in private and public spheres. The local clergy are often seen by some of the participants, including women as using their authority to maintain their influence and to define woman's position in the society and her rights. As one of the participants stated that the local Mullah does not like to allow young girls to get an education and tried to find pretexts to suppress women's voices. He contended that common people are misled through an FM channel in the area, and they do not like women to gain independence (Reference B01). Similarly, a female participant argued that women are deprived of their inheritance because local customs conflict with Islam. In her view, Islam grants women the right to inheritance, but in practice, people follow their customs (Reference B03).

On the other hand, from the same tribal district, village elders and maliks deny using religion to manipulate women's rights. In a discussion with an influential Malik, he contended that religion has consistently supported women in their struggle, and women are more actively involved in following religion (Reference B04). Similarly, when discussing these issues with a local MPA, he claimed that the religion was always used to empower women (Reference B02). Moreover, another respondent argued that there are very few cases where religious discourse is used as a weapon against women (Reference B06). Another local participant argued that there is no confusion between Islamic injunctions and women's rights; everything is clear in this regard, and no one oppresses women. However, women cannot access religious education online because there is no internet connection in the area (Reference B07). Our last respondent was just taking a biased view because it is against the facts in the area.

These tribal elders and representatives see religion in a positive light about empowering women. However, a slightly nuanced view could be adopted because men not only control the cultural arena but also lead religious discourse and interpretation. While talking to a political leader and religious scholar from Bajaur, who was assassinated recently, he believed that sometimes religious discourse is misused to justify acts of violence against women. He believed that Islam permits women to exercise their freedom within certain guidelines, such as wearing the veil or headscarf (Reference B05). His view unravels the fact that, oftentimes, there are voices from inside tribal leadership categories who believe that tribal women are suppressed in the name of religion or some interpretation of it.

Our survey data in Bajaur (chart below) suggests that 58% of women accept the fact that men's treatment of women is affected by the religious discourse. However, for 23% of women, that is not the case. When it comes to the impact of religious sermons and speeches, 55% women are of the view that men's behavior is influenced by them. While 45% of women do not believe that men's attitude is shaped by such activities. Moreover, we also found that 87% of women surveyed in Bajaur believe that religious sermons and speeches help them in raising their voices. This may be because their perspectives on religion and their rights are influenced by such religious sermons and speeches.

As far as the question is concerned whether men use religion as a tool to deny women their rights, 32 % of the female participants thought so. A greater number of around 45 % considered men using religion in a more positive light of providing rights to women in their area.

Religious Narrative and Women's Rights in the Orakzai

Women in the Orakzai district are facing numerous issues, particularly those related to the use of religious discourse in defining or denying them rights. We reached out to different people from the area in order to make sense of the existing situation within the context of the merger and women's ability to raise their voice in the political and social structure. In a discussion with a local religious scholar, we were told that people in the area are quite aware of their condition. He upholds the view that these cultural and religious restrictions on women are for the benefit of women. And as per the status quo, the tribal structure has protected women's rights. He added, "Khaza ajiz shay day", women are a weak entity, and therefore, they (men) would not allow any kind of injustice to them. While quoting a verse from the Holy Qur'an, he argued that women should stay at home and not roam around like in the ignorant times (zamana jahiliyyah). He further asserted that the tribal people rightfully do not send their women to earn money or to bring wood from the mountains. They are given their place inside the house (Reference OR05). Here we see the intermingling of patriarchal structures with divine injunctions to justify female seclusion from public spaces. He further argued that those who would commit acts of violence against women are no longer present in their area. In a discussion with the local Malik, he believed that Islam has given property and inheritance rights to women. They have also been given the right to marry whoever they want, but the people in the tribal areas do not follow these religious injunctions (Reference OR01).

On the contrary, a social activist in the area commenting on this issue said that they are Muslims and they are thankful for that, but the tribal structures are not legitimate in every way. They discriminate against women based on religion and culture (Reference OR02). A female student from the area argued that the local elders and leaders use religion to suppress women. She added that local clerics talk in a discriminatory language against women. They argue that for women, there is either a home or a graveyard (Kor ya Gor) (Reference OR03). A similar view is offered by another social activist, who argues that the problem is not in religion but in those who follow religion for their own interests. He added that oftentimes, there are these clerics with half knowledge who spread negative and misogynistic ideas about women (Reference OR06). The discussion around religious discourse and women's discrimination indicates that people are aware of these problems, and thus, they rightfully question the status quo; however, the clergy and religious scholars are stubbornly maintaining a narrow interpretation of religion.

In our surveys, we found that for 83% women, religious narrative and discourse affect the way men think and treat women. However, for 17% of women, that is not the case. Moreover, around a similar percentage (83%) of women also think that men's perceptions and ways of treating women are affected by the religious sermons and speeches.

We found that for 53% of women in the area, men use religion as a tool to justify giving rights to women. However, for 37% of women, men use religion as a tool to deny women their rights. For these women, these figures are reflective of the problem of extremist interpretation of religion that discourages women from participating in society at large.

Silencing Women in the Name of Religion in Kurram

Like other districts in the tribal areas, Kurram is also facing challenges in the case of women's public participation and raising their voices. Among many other factors, one of the most problematic is the role of religious discourse. In a discussion with the local mosque imam, he argued that in the Kurram district, the Islamic system is very robust, and religion is not a hurdle for women in the struggle for their rights. He also thinks there could be some narrow-minded people who only see Pashtun customs and religion in a myopic way, which could be a hurdle for women (Reference K03). Again, we can interpret that the customary practices denying women their rightful public presence are considered in tune with the religious teachings about women. Frequently, male members of society shy away from acknowledging that women are constrained by customs and traditions that are inherently patriarchal. It also irritates men to critically question their views, leading them to seek refuge in specific religious discourses. Regarding the role of religion, a local Malik argued that religion has never played a discriminatory role on gender basis. In his view, religion is very sacred, and all men and women must follow religious practices. He also believes that religion has rarely been used as a weapon against women, except in some minor cases (Reference K05). His attitude reflects a typical male mindset on women's issues, rooted in a patriarchal approach that refuses to recognize women's problems initially.

On the contrary, in a discussion with the local social activist, he said that the religious card is often used against women for the purpose of maintaining power. The entire infrastructure of Ulema or religious scholars is built on their self-interest. In the Lower-Kurram district, there are many religious seminaries where women are being taught religious education, but they are not allowed to learn any new skills. And the religious education is based on an extremist narrative. These different religious scholars polarize them through religious indoctrination. He added that it is important to empower women with some basic skills so that they can earn a better life for themselves (Reference K02). While speaking with a female teacher, she argued that since society is male-dominated, men manipulate religion for their benefit, and many religious clerics support oppression against women. Numerous religious leaders and sectarian groups use religion as a weapon against women. Some employ extremist tactics, often supported by old men holding very orthodox views on society (Reference K04). Her perspectives reflect a realistic view of a tribal society where women are not supposed to voice their opinions in front of men. In a similar set of argument, a local Malik claimed that influential people leverage religious cards against women when they want to participate in the Jirga, visit government offices, or talk to someone outside their home. All local religious leaders try to restrict women to their households and instruct them to pray with rosaries (Reference K06).

In our quantitative survey with local women in Kurram, we found that 53% of them believe that religious narratives affect men's attitudes towards them. For 47% of women, their men are not affected by the religious discourse either positively or negatively. According to another survey questionnaire, 60% of women say that different religious sermons and preaching change and shape men's attitudes towards them. However, for 30% of women that is not the case. In an answer to another survey question, 50% of women say that religious speeches and sermons help them raise their voices, while 40% of women disagree. The latter percentage is quite significant in indicating the role of religious preaching and talks. As we mentioned earlier, in most cases, it has been observed that men use the

religious card against women when it comes to their rights and problems.

Moreover, 23% of women in the area say that men use religion as a tool to deny women their rights, while almost the same percentage of women argue otherwise. For them, men use religion as a tool to justify giving them rights. The notable exception here is the more than 50 % of women who preferred not to answer this question. This may be because of the fact that such women consider this question to be too sensitive to make an honest reply and therefore prefer to remain silent on the issue.

Weaponizing Religion against Women's Rights in South Waziristan?

In the South Waziristan District, the participants emphasized that religious elites and traditional ones play a significant role in maintaining the existing cultural and patriarchal norms and defining religion around it to influence women's rights. Oftentimes, religious clerics try to invoke religious doctrines to support arguments against women's role in tribal society. The chairman of the Union Council in South Waziristan argued that, unlike other religions, Islam has provided more rights to women; however, the problem is that people follow Islam as per their desires. They like to accept things that are beneficial to themselves and forget the real message. He does not believe that some groups of people have been using religion as a weapon against women. He thinks that religious scholars are quite up to date on religious discourse, and they agree with the modern way of life (Reference W05). Similarly, one university student from the area, argued that Pashtun culture is predominantly connected to Islamic injunctions. People like to follow the culture of the veil as a symbol of religious and moral duty. If there is anything seemingly against the independence of women and supported by culture and religion, then nobody is responsible for that because it is not allowed (Reference W03). There is also the contention that some religious scholars guide women while using different religious platforms. However, people do not consider the use of social media to be beneficial because they believe that it is not compatible with their ground reality (Reference W03).

While talking to the local people on the question of religious dogmas, one participant said that religion is often misused to deny women their due rights. It is also misinterpreted to exploit women. In the history of humankind, women have been mistreated; however, when the Holy Prophet (PBUH) came, he talked about women's rights and their protection. Following the traditions of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), he says that the Tablighi Juma'at has actively been talking about women's rights and their role in society (Reference W01). His view expresses an argument where a positive and broad-minded interpretation is used to justify women's role in society. However, in most other cases, for example, women's right to be economically independent, having access to public education, or politics, it can be seen that the majority of men resort to the cultural argument. As is often the case, there is a very thin line between culture and religion, where male members of the society tilt wherever they feel comfortable.

Contrary to the above set of opinion, women participants from Kurram who were interviewed uphold a more progressive view on women's rights. A female professor from Kurram argued that religion has been used as a weapon against women. They talk about women's duties and ignore their rights. In her opinion, the Maliks and Mullahs (Clerics) use religion to paralyze the development of women in every walk of life, including educational, political representation, or social affairs. Added to that, she said, religious doctrines are not discriminatory in themselves; rather, it is the interpretation that is based on a biased attitude against women. Similarly, women's voices are hardly present in social media (Reference W04).

Speaking with a female student from the area, she argued that most of the time, the discriminatory behavior comes out of the culture, not religion. Some people indeed use religion to suppress women. In the tribal areas, no woman rebelled against religious doctrines. Religion never prevents someone from

getting an education and or becoming economically independent. She further added, "I have noticed that in Jumma prayers, religious clerics do not openly talk about women's issues. Oftentimes, they just insist on men's rights and women's duties and not vice versa" (Reference W02). It would be highly impactful if religious clerics could change people's behavior by talking about women's rights. Moreover, she argues that sometimes other women (mothers and elder sisters) create fear in the minds of young girls, which culminates in a lack of self-esteem to question patriarchal elements in the culture (Reference W02).

Our survey results in South Waziristan suggest that 71% of women from the area say that religious discourse affects men in their attitude towards them. While 29% of women do not agree. Following the above claim, around 71% of women also believe that different religious speeches and sermons from the clergy are affecting men's attitude towards women. Though 29% of women do not agree with that statement. In another question, survey result state that 55% of women claim that religious speeches and sermons do not help women in raising their voices. However, 45% of women consider that religious sermons help women in raising their voices.

In another survey questionnaire, 74% of women argue that men use religion as a tool to deny women their rights. While only 7% of the women do not agree with the statement. It indicates a very significant ratio of women who claim that men are weaponizing religion against women.

Oppressive Cultural Norms and Religious Clergy in Mohmand

Religious (mis)interpretation and cultural taboos play a crucial role in the discrimination against women in Mohmand District. In our discussions with women, we found that they are quite cognizant of what is happening around them. Therefore, many women critique the existing oppressive norms and religious discourse. It is not to argue that they are against religion per se; rather, they argue against a particular interpretation that is based on an extremist and patriarchal narrative.

Speaking with a local female from the area, she argued that religious discourse is used in a discriminatory way against women. They used the pretext of Purdah (gender segregation) by saying that religion commands women to be kept under Purdah. Therefore, she argues that it is just believed that women are entitled to certain rights; however, in practice, none of them exist. It is important to interpret religion properly to allow women to exercise their social and political rights (Reference MO02). Another respondent, who is a local social activist, endorsed the above statement by saying that religious discourse is used to discriminate against women. He said that he had never heard anything from a religious cleric regarding women's empowerment. In his view, it is necessary to work on the correct understanding of religion when it comes to women's rights (Reference MO04).

Moreover, while discussing these issues with the local Malik, he said that the problem lies with the religious clerics rather than the religion itself. Their intention is basically to convince women that they have to vote only for religious parties. He questions the contradictory nature of religious discourse as offered by clerics by saying that if women are not allowed to get an education outside their home, then how could they also demand female medical practitioners when their wives are unwell? He believes that these clerics are misguided on this issue (Reference MO06). A female teacher from the area argued that religion is used to curtail women's rights in the case of marriage. They force women into marriages when they just pass their matriculation examination (Reference MO03). She was referring to the grave issue of underage marriages, which is quite common in the tribal areas.

Our survey questionnaire from Mohmand shows different statistics regarding women's opinions on the religious clergy and the impact of their sermons on men. 63% of women say that men are influenced by religious discourse when it comes to their treatment of them, while 37% of women do not agree that

religion influences men's attitudes towards them. As per another survey question, around 93% of women claim that religious sermons and speeches play an important role in shaping men's thoughts and actions towards women, while 7% of women do not agree with that statement. However, a significant number of women (60%) argue that these religious sermons and speeches do not enable them to raise their voices. It means that most of these religious sermons are mobilized against women's active participation in society. Though 40% of women do not agree with the assertion.

Another result below indicates that almost 40% of women accept that men use religion as a tool to justify giving them their rights, while 27% do not agree with the statement. They argue that men use religion as a tool to deny women their rights.

Militancy and (Mis) interpretation of Religion in North Waziristan

The district of North Waziristan has been facing the problem of militancy and religious extremism for over two decades. As it is common among all tribal areas that men control religious discourse, language, and spaces, therefore, quite frequently their target is to control the opposite gender. For this purpose, a narrow and exclusive interpretation is operationalized among the male members of the society. In many cases, men blame either the state for not protecting women or blame women themselves.

Speaking to a resident of the area about the role of religion and the existing hurdles to women, he said, there are multiple hurdles to women from the side of religious discourse. He highlighted that besides the clergy; the concept of Purdah (gender segregation) is also a major hurdle for women. When it comes to the violation of religious commands, such as promiscuous behavior, Islam relies on the witnesses and proof, not on the apparent condition of a person. Islam has also put the principle of good Muslims who can be trusted as witnesses. It shows that there is a comprehensive system based on certain rules and principles. Sadly, people kill women just based on suspicious behavior without any solid evidence. He asserted that the predominant thinking is that women are not allowed to speak out loud in front of men. In his words,

"...the current shape of religion for women is not less than a monster (Reference NW002)."

Another participant from the area argued that Islam has granted more rights to women than any other religion. However, the problem is that those rights have not been fully realized. In his view, every religion promotes the welfare of humanity; however, the issue begins with people who consider themselves the stakeholders of Islam. The state must intervene and protect people from harmful interpretations by building a counter-narrative. It is very unfortunate that many criminals are not being punished in this country. He asserted that religion itself has a very broad scope, and the Holy Prophet (PBUH) not only engaged in commerce but also encouraged his wives. It is important to research the lives of women in the early Islamic era. It shows that Muslim women should not only accept the teachings of Islam but also follow the practical examples of the *Ummahat Ul Momineen-mother of the believers* (Reference NW003).

In a discussion with a female university student from the area, she argued that religious doctrines do not discriminate against women. It is the problem of the Taliban's perspective on religion, which does not believe in women's education. The moderate version of Islam rather stresses education for both genders. She added that the mainstream religious clerics try to promote hatred in their messages. They would urge people to confine women within the four walls of the house. Their motivation is to promote the concept of four marriages for men and to increase the population. There is nothing there to empower women. For them, women are just objects and topics of conversation. And that is why men

mistreat their wives at home (Reference NW004). Similarly, another participant from the area argued that the whole debate on religion and gender could be seen as an issue of interpretation. He believes that misinterpretation has exploited the real understanding of religion concerning women's rights. He added that whenever the stakeholders in society feel threatened and insecure, they try to weaponise religion (Reference NW005).

Our survey data in North Waziristan suggest that around 78% of women believe their men's thoughts and attitudes are shaped by religious sermons and speeches. In addition, 46% of women say that different online religious platforms help in enabling their voices, while for 25% of women, that is not the case.

An overwhelming 64% of women also claim that men use religion as a tool to deny their rights. For 21% of women, it is not the case, and men use religion as a tool to give them their rights.

The Overlapping Narrative between Customs and Religious Discourse in Khyber

The general perception among the clergy in the tribal districts is that the tribal customs, named 'riwayat' were in conjunction with Islam unless when interpreted too harshly. In the Khyber agency, in a discussion on religion and gender with a religious scholar and Mufti from Bara tehsil, he argued that under the Qur'an and Sunnah, there is not a single injunction that contradicts women's rights. In the case of tribal customs, he stated that all these 'riwayat' can be in harmony with Islam as long as they are not interpreted too extremely. He said, Islam believes in moderation; thus, a moderate interpretation of religion aligns with tribal culture. However, it should be noted that Shariat prioritizes men due to their dominance in the culture. He added while citing a verse from the Holy Qur'an, that men are superior to women (Reference KH05). One can observe the congenial connection between a particular version of the religion and tribal riwayat. These words are embodiment of the fact that religious knowledge and discourse formation contributes to the development of power through cultural norms. After all, tribal riwayat maintains its legitimacy within normative standards via religious discourse. However, it is essential to consider that religious discourse and the clergy as just one factor. Additionally, the British colonial legacy in the form of traditional institutions of governance or Maliki and masharan (village headmen and elders) plays a role in oppressively maintaining cultural norms. These traditional institutions of power also dominate the Jirga's where women are hardly represented. These socio-political dynamics of the tribal structure in the tribal areas place women in a challenging situation, and local people felt that merging with settled areas could help protect their rights from the oppressive cultural way of life.

In the quantitative surveys from tribal women in the Khyber merged district, around 93% women contend that religious discourse affects their men's behaviour towards their women. This also reflects that the tribal women's position and rights as practiced under customary laws such as the riwayat is conflated by these women to have stemmed from religion. It is also argued that most of the time, men shape their opinion and thought after they listen to some version of religious argument from the local clergy. In another survey result, our data indicates that 60 % of women from Khyber think that their men change and shape their opinions when they hear religious sermons and speeches. In the case of the positive impact of religious discourse on women, another data point based on questions suggests that for 67% of women, different speeches and sermons have helped them to raise their voices for their rights. Moreover, in the case of online religious platforms majority of women (47%) say that they have not been empowered to raise their voices. While 43% of women are affirmative of the role of online platforms in raising their voices. This reflects slow internet coverage or lack of access to the internet by the womenfolk of the merged districts.

Another data further elaborates the above-mentioned statistic, indicating that for 57% of women, men use religion more positively to justify giving rights to their women. However, for 23% women, that is not the case. Also conspicuous is that around 20 % of women preferred to remain silent on account of this question being sensitive. Men often use a version of religious argument as a tool to deny women their equal rights. As discussed in the beginning, many men follow a customary and traditional understanding/interpretation of religion to justify their actions.

Conclusions

In the former tribal belt and now merged districts of Pakistan, patriarchal customs intermingle with religious discourses to create varied obstacles in the way of women's meaningful participation in public spheres. In our research we wanted to explore the impact of discursive practices stemming from either culture or religion which hindered women's agency and confining her to the four walls of her home. The data analysis both from qualitative in-depth interviews and quantitative surveys from the different merged districts indicate interesting findings in this regard. It is clear that the women of the tribal areas have a consciousness that their men are most impressed by religious elites and religious discourses in their treatment of their women and that the sermons and speeches of such elites often impacts the men to deny women their due rights in public life. However, a considerable number of women also believe that the influences men undergo as a result of religious clergy's influence makes their men treat them in a better manner. This is perhaps because of the fact that women in the tribal belt are already reeling heavily under the burden of patriarchal customs and traditions which had a very retrogressive impacts on their lives. Therefore, their perception about religion providing them more rights that are somehow denied by the menfolk who are the custodians of the Pakhtunwali code of conduct and the Riwayat.

The women of former FATA also display their agency in the varied role and responsibilities they are undertaking and acknowledge the role of misinterpretation and the underlying power structures that sustain the process of dominance at the cultural level. The qualitative interviews reflect that with little exception, most of the tribal elites from all the tribal agencies, including the religious elites and their traditional counterparts-maliks and masharan deny using religion to manipulate the women; instead, they focus on how religion is empowering, rather than dis-empowering the tribal women. On the other hand, most of the civil society members, educated women and those employed think of the clergy as using their authority to maintain their influence and to define woman's position in the society and her rights. This means enforcing forcefully the idea of purdah (gender segregation) and denying women their roles in the public spheres.

Women are also conscious of the fact that patriarchal customs are inter-mixed with religious discourse to deny them their due rights and uphold the notion that these cultural and religious restrictions are for the benefit of the women. Religious injunctions are interpreted to provide the argument that since women are created as weak creatures; therefore, they need the protection of their menfolk and their rightful place being inside. Here we see the intermingling of patriarchal structures with divine injunctions to justify female seclusion from public spaces. There is a very strong perception among the religious and the traditional elite that when it comes to women's rights, including her education, political and legal rights, both customary practices and religious doctrines are fully aligned. In case where women's rights are being trampled upon, the argument that is given is that it was culture and religion perse which led to the infringement of women's rights. Hence, in most cases of right's violation, there is a tendency to blame culture rather than religion as many women participants also see religion's role in a more positive light. Contrary to the early opinion, a female professor argued that religion has

been used as a weapon against women. Therefore, even educated women assert that religious doctrines are not discriminatory against women, it is the biased cultural interpretation which creates prejudices against women. In some of the districts though such as Kurram and in North Waziristan, a majority of the women participants (74 % and 64 % respectively) also believe that their men are using religion as a tool to deny them their rightful place in the society. Interestingly, for some tribal women, religious sermons and speeches have also helped them to raise their voices for their rights inside their households. Though in each case, a majority of women do believe that such sermons and speeches from the clergy shapes the opinion of their men in relation to their rights obligations. And many from these then contend that religion is used as a tool by their men (as argued earlier) to suppress their rights.

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List of Interviewees

No	Respondent code	Area	Gender	Profession	Date of Interview
1	KH05	Khyber District	Male	Religious Scholar	February, 2025
2	B01	Bajaur District	Male	Working with the NGOs	February, 2025
3	B03	Bajaur District	Female	Household management	February, 2025
4	B06	Bajaur District	Male	Local resident	February, 2025
5	B02	Bajaur District	Male	MPA	February, 2025
6	B04	Bajaur District	Male	Malak	February, 2025
7	B05	Bajaur District	Male	Religious Scholar and Political Leader	February, 2025
8	B07	Bajaur District	Male	PDMA	February, 2025
9	OR05	Orakzai District	Male	Religious Scholar	February, 2025
10	OR02	Orakzai District	Male	Working with NGOs	February, 2025
11	OR01	Orakzai District	Male	Malak	February, 2025
12	OR03	Orakzai District	Female	Working with NGOs	February, 2025
13	OR06	Orakzai District	Male	Shop-manager	February, 2025
14	KU02	Kurram District	Male	Social Activist	February, 2025
15	KU03	Kurram District	Male	Local Imam	February, 2025
16	KU04	Kurram District	Female	Teacher	February, 2025
17	KU05	Kurram District	Male	Malak	February, 2025
18	KU06	Kurram District	Male	Malak	February, 2025

19	SW01	South Waziristan District	Male	Local resident	March, 2025
20	SW02	South Waziristan District	Female	BS Student	March, 2025
21	SW03	South Waziristan District	Male	BS Student	March, 2025
22	SW04	South Waziristan District	Female	Professor	March, 2025
23	SW05	South Waziristan District	Male	Chairman UC	March, 2025
24	MO02	Mohmand District	Female	School Teacher	March, 2025
25	MO04	Mohmand District	Male	Working with the NGOs	March, 2025
26	MO06	Mohmand District	Male	Malak	March, 2025
27	MO03	Mohmand District	Female	School Teacher	March, 2025
28	MO05	Mohmand District	Male	MNA	March, 2025
29	NW02	North Waziristan District	Male	Working with NGOs	March, 2025
30	NW03	North Waziristan District	Male	Malak	March, 2025
31	NW04	North Waziristan District	Female	Resident	March, 2025
32	NW05	North Waziristan District	Male	Assistant Director	March, 2025