

The Impact of Cultural Norms on Women's Leadership in Swat: A Feminist Study

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Abstract

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This exploratory qualitative study examines how cultural norms shape women's leadership in Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. It draws on semi-structured interviews with four women occupying leadership roles, selected purposively to obtain perspectives from different leadership experiences. Using thematic analysis and a feminist interpretive lens, the study identifies four connected areas: traditional gender-role expectations; male-dominated authority and decision-making; constraints involving family and community support, professional networks, resources, and gender bias; and low representation and stereotypes alongside perceived possibilities for change. The analysis suggests that cultural expectations become consequential through concrete mechanisms, including restrictions on mobility and public participation, unequal recognition of authority, reduced access to networks, and gendered evaluations of competence. At the same time, the source material indicates that women's leadership is not entirely static and that changing awareness, organizational inclusion, and women's participation in community institutions may create openings for greater leadership. Because the study is based on only four interviews and the available records do not provide participant demographics, verbatim quotations, detailed interview metadata, or a fully documented analytic trail, the findings are presented as exploratory rather than representative of all women in Swat. The study contributes a context-sensitive account of how household, community, organizational, and wider institutional conditions can interact in shaping women's leadership and identifies priorities for more transparent and comparative research.

Keywords: women's leadership; cultural norms; Swat; Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; gender; feminist analysis; qualitative research



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1. INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in leadership is shaped by more than education, skills, or individual ambition. Leadership is exercised within social environments that define who is expected to speak, decide, represent a group, move in public space, pursue a career, and combine professional responsibilities with family obligations. Cultural values therefore matter because they influence the meanings attached to authority, gender, work, mobility, family responsibility, and public participation (Agha, 2003; Toh & Leonardelli, 2012). These influences are particularly important to examine in settings where social and family institutions remain central to everyday decision-making.

Swat, located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, has a distinctive social and historical context in which gender relations are shaped by family structures, community expectations, educational opportunities, institutional arrangements, and the effects of conflict and development. Earlier scholarship from Pakistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa identifies gendered inequalities in education, employment, career progression, networking, and decision-making (Ghazi et al., 2011; Shah & Shah, 2012; Taj, 2016; Sarwar & Imran, 2019). Research focused on Swat also shows that women's empowerment and participation have been affected by changing development conditions and periods of crisis (Elahi et al., 2015). Such scholarship establishes the importance of context, but it does not replace direct attention to how women who already occupy leadership roles understand the cultural expectations surrounding their work.

In this study, leadership refers to a position or role in which a person exercises recognized responsibility, influence, representation, or decision-making within an organizational, professional, civic, or community setting. Cultural norms refer to socially shared expectations and practices concerning appropriate conduct, gender roles, family obligations, authority, and public participation. These definitions avoid treating culture as a fixed or singular force. Swat contains rural-urban, educational, occupational, class, family, and local differences, and the experiences of four women cannot be assumed to represent every woman or community in the district.

The central argument of the paper is that cultural norms influence women's leadership through multiple, connected levels. Household expectations can shape time, mobility, education, and family support; community norms can affect the legitimacy granted to women's public authority; organizational practices can influence recruitment, networking, advancement, and access to resources; and wider institutional conditions can either reinforce or challenge established gender arrangements. A feminist perspective is useful for examining these processes because it directs attention to gendered power relations and to women's own accounts of how authority is recognized and negotiated.

1.1 Research Objectives

- To examine the cultural norms identified by interviewed women leaders in Swat, with particular attention to gender roles, male-dominated authority, family and community expectations, and stereotypes surrounding leadership.
- To assess how these norms are described as constraining, shaping, or potentially enabling women's access to and exercise of leadership positions.
- To interpret the reported experiences through a feminist lens that distinguishes household, community, organizational, and wider institutional mechanisms rather than treating culture as a single homogeneous explanation.

1.2 Research Questions

- What cultural norms did the interviewed women leaders identify as relevant to their leadership roles in Swat?

- How did the interviewed women leaders describe these norms as constraining, shaping, or potentially enabling their access to and exercise of leadership?

1.3. Significance of the Study

The study is significant because it focuses specifically on women who have already entered leadership roles and asks how they understand the cultural environment surrounding their authority. Much of the relevant literature documents broad gender inequalities, educational barriers, violence, employment constraints, or institutional conditions. By concentrating on leadership experiences, this study connects those broader concerns to the practical mechanisms through which women may gain, sustain, or be restricted within positions of influence. The findings can inform future research and discussion among educational institutions, employers, civil-society organizations, community actors, and policymakers, while the small sample requires that practical recommendations remain proportionate to the evidence.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between cultural norms and women's leadership can be understood most clearly by separating several levels of influence that often overlap in practice: household and kinship expectations, community norms and legitimacy, organizational practices, and wider institutional and historical conditions. This layered approach is preferable to describing "culture" as a single cause because gendered expectations acquire practical force through specific relationships, rules, opportunities, and forms of social approval or disapproval.

2.1. Household and Kinship Expectations

At the household level, expectations concerning women's domestic responsibilities can shape educational choices, employment, mobility, time, and willingness or ability to accept demanding public roles. Ghazi et al. (2011) connect family structural norms with gender disparity in Pakistan, particularly in relation to education and decision-making. Sarwar and Imran (2019) similarly describe women's careers as influenced by interacting macro-, meso-, and micro-level barriers. These studies suggest that leadership trajectories may be affected well before a woman formally seeks a leadership position. If professional advancement requires travel, networking, extended working hours, or public visibility, family expectations can become a practical condition of access.

The original version of the present paper also emphasized role expectations that prioritize family obligations over professional development. This point is consistent with broader cross-cultural work on gender and leadership, but it should not be interpreted as meaning that family life and leadership are inherently incompatible. The relevant question is how responsibilities and decision-making power are distributed, and whether women receive the support, mobility, time, and recognition required to pursue leadership on terms comparable to men.

2.2. Community Norms, Gender Roles, and Leadership Legitimacy

Community-level norms influence how leadership itself is imagined. Toh and Leonardelli (2012) argue that the strength of social norms can affect the emergence of women as leaders, especially where deviations from established gender roles attract social penalties. In such contexts, women may confront not only formal barriers but also assumptions that leadership, public speech, or authoritative decision-making are more naturally associated with men. These expectations can affect both women's aspirations and the reception they receive when they exercise authority.

Evidence from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa illustrates that gendered institutions are not entirely closed to change. Gul and Fayaz (2022) examine women's participation in dispute resolution through the Khwendo Jirga, showing how women can enter decision-making spaces while negotiating institutions historically dominated by men. Khattak et al. (2020), in Lower Dir, examine the relationship between religion and women's leadership and discuss the importance of

education, political awareness, and institutional support. These studies are contextually relevant to Swat, but differences among districts and communities mean they should be used as comparative context rather than direct evidence about every woman in Swat.

2.3. Organizational Practices and Career Advancement

Organizational settings can reproduce or moderate wider cultural expectations. Shah and Shah (2012) show that women's educational leadership is embedded in societal culture, while Taj (2016) identifies networking difficulties, recruitment practices, family dynamics, organizational structures, politics, and security as challenges for female educational leaders in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These findings are important because they move the discussion beyond personal attitudes. Even where a woman is qualified and her family supports her career, advancement can still depend on access to professional networks, transparent recruitment, mentoring, resources, and organizational recognition.

At a broader institutional level, Bullough et al. (2012) associate women's political leadership with social, economic, political, and cultural conditions. The implication for the present study is that women's leadership should not be explained only by individual motivation or by an abstract cultural barrier. Opportunities are also produced by institutions: organizations decide whom to recruit, promote, mentor, include in decision-making, and present as legitimate leaders. These decisions can either reinforce existing gender expectations or help normalize women's authority.

2.4 Wider Socioeconomic and Historical Conditions

Women's leadership in Swat must also be situated within wider historical and socioeconomic conditions. Elahi et al. (2015) show that participatory development processes affected women's empowerment in Swat and that conflict and disaster altered the possibilities for participation. This is relevant because leadership opportunities are not formed in a stable social environment; they can expand or contract as security, institutions, development programs, education, and local economies change. Qaisrani et al. (2016), although focused on violence against women rather than leadership, likewise demonstrate the importance of socioeconomic and cultural structures in understanding gender relations in Pakistan.

The original manuscript also pointed to changing awareness, organizational diversity, technology, and social media as possible openings for women. These ideas are plausible contextual developments, but the available interview record does not establish the extent to which each emerged directly from participants. They are therefore treated here as contextual possibilities rather than confirmed empirical findings. This distinction is important for preserving the boundary between interview-based evidence and broader interpretation.

2.5 Feminist Theoretical Framework

The study uses a feminist interpretive framework to examine how gendered power relations shape leadership. The original manuscript drew particularly on Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of women's social construction as the "Other" (de Beauvoir, 2016). In the context of leadership, this perspective directs attention to the way men can be treated as the unmarked or default holders of authority while women are evaluated as exceptions to an assumed norm. The framework therefore asks not simply whether women hold leadership titles, but whose authority is recognized, whose competence is questioned, and what forms of negotiation are required for women to exercise leadership.

For the present qualitative study, the framework is applied as a feminist standpoint orientation: women leaders' accounts are treated as an important source for understanding how gendered structures are experienced in everyday leadership. This does not mean that four participants can speak for all women in Swat. Rather, their accounts can illuminate mechanisms that may be

overlooked when leadership is studied only through formal positions or aggregate indicators. Because the source material does not provide detailed demographic profiles, the study cannot make substantiated claims about differences by class, age, education, locality, or other intersecting characteristics.

2.6 Empirical Gap

Existing scholarship identifies gendered barriers to education, careers, organizational leadership, political participation, and decision-making in Pakistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. What remains useful to examine is how women already occupying leadership roles in Swat interpret the cultural expectations surrounding their authority. The present study addresses this narrow exploratory gap. Its contribution lies not in estimating prevalence, but in organizing the reported experiences into mechanisms operating across household, community, organizational, and institutional levels.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study used a qualitative, exploratory design based on semi-structured interviews. Qualitative interviewing is appropriate where the aim is to understand how participants interpret social expectations, barriers, and opportunities within a particular context. Because only four women were interviewed, the study is best understood as a small exploratory multiple-case inquiry rather than as a representative account of women's leadership across Swat.

3.2 Sampling and Participants

The source manuscript states that four women leaders were selected purposively and that the selection sought variation in leadership background and sector, including reference to public, private, and civil-society settings. However, the available versions do not provide a participant table or verifiable details on age, education, occupation, exact sector distribution, years of leadership experience, locality, recruitment pathway, or detailed inclusion criteria. Those characteristics are therefore not reconstructed or invented in this cleaned version. Their absence limits the reader's ability to assess variation across cases and the transferability of the findings.

3.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were the main method of data collection. The source manuscript records three core interview questions: (1) What do you think about cultural norms in Swat? (2) How do you think cultural norms in Swat affect women's leadership roles? and (3) What specific cultural practices do you believe affect women's ability to become leaders in Swat? These open questions are consistent with the exploratory purpose because they allow participants to identify norms and mechanisms in their own terms rather than requiring them to respond to a predetermined list of barriers.

The available manuscript does not report the interview language, location or mode, duration, dates, use of follow-up prompts, recording procedures, transcription, translation, or data-storage arrangements. These details are methodologically important and should be inserted from the researchers' original records before journal submission. They cannot be supplied reliably by comparing the three manuscript versions because none documents them.

3.4 Data Analysis

The source study describes its analysis as thematic. Interview material was coded, responses were compared, and recurrent patterns were grouped into themes concerning cultural norms and women's leadership. The cleaned version retains thematic analysis as the single analytical description and removes any implication of a separate discourse-analysis procedure that is not

documented in the source records. The reported themes are treated as the outcome of the original analysis rather than as an independently reproducible re-analysis.

The available versions do not document a formal codebook, sequential stages of coding, independent or multiple coding, saturation, negative-case analysis, software use, or a named published thematic-analysis protocol. For that reason, the analysis is described at the level supported by the manuscript. A stronger final submission should add the actual analytic steps from the researchers' records, including how initial codes were developed, combined into themes, reviewed, and checked against the interview material.

3.5 Ethics, Confidentiality, and Reflexivity

The available versions do not provide verifiable information on ethics approval, informed consent, anonymization procedures, participant risk, data protection, researcher positionality, or reflexive practices. These are material reporting gaps in a qualitative study involving a small and potentially identifiable group of women leaders. The final manuscript should state only procedures that can be confirmed from the original research records. It should also explain how participant identities were protected and how the researcher's relationship to the setting may have shaped interviewing and interpretation.

3.6 Scope and Trustworthiness

The evidentiary scope of the study is limited by the small sample and by incomplete reporting in the manuscript. Four interviews can illuminate experiences and mechanisms but cannot establish how common a view is across Swat. Trustworthiness would be strengthened by adding anonymized participant profiles, several short verbatim extracts under each theme, contrasts between participants, divergent or negative cases, and any documented procedures used to check interpretations. In the absence of these materials, the findings below are presented cautiously as reported themes rather than population-level conclusions.

4. FINDINGS

The original analysis identifies several overlapping themes. The cleaned version organizes them into four broader areas to reduce repetition and clarify the relationship between cultural expectations and leadership mechanisms. Because the supplied manuscripts contain no verbatim participant quotations or case-level descriptions, the discussion does not attribute statements to individual participants and does not claim that every theme was expressed equally by all four women.

4.1 Traditional Gender-Role Expectations

The first theme concerns expectations that women should give primary attention to domestic and family responsibilities. In the original analysis, these expectations were linked to women's time, mobility, education, career participation, and acceptance in visible leadership roles. Leadership often requires sustained professional engagement, travel, networking, public interaction, and decision-making. When these activities conflict with socially prescribed expectations of women's domestic availability, women may face a double requirement: to fulfil conventional family roles while also meeting the demands of leadership.

The theme is important because it shows that barriers to leadership can begin before a formal appointment. Educational opportunities, permission or support for employment, mobility, and exposure to professional networks can shape the pool of women able to compete for leadership positions. The source manuscript also associates traditional stereotypes with assumptions about women's leadership ability. Such assumptions can narrow opportunity by defining women as supportive or nurturing actors while reserving authoritative roles for men.

This finding should not be read as evidence that all families in Swat restrict women in the same way. The manuscript does not provide enough case detail to distinguish supportive from restrictive family environments. The defensible interpretation is that gender-role expectations were identified in the original analysis as a relevant social mechanism that can affect leadership trajectories.

4.2 Male-Dominated Authority and Decision-Making

A second theme concerns male dominance in household and wider decision-making. The source manuscript describes a patriarchal social arrangement in which men are more readily associated with authority and leadership. Within such an arrangement, women seeking or exercising leadership may encounter resistance because their authority challenges an established expectation about who should decide, represent, or occupy senior positions.

From a feminist perspective, the issue is not only numerical male dominance but the legitimacy attached to male authority. If leadership is culturally coded as masculine, women's competence may be subject to greater scrutiny, their decisions may require additional validation, and their presence in senior roles may be treated as exceptional. This can reproduce inequality even when formal rules do not explicitly exclude women. The theme therefore connects cultural belief to an institutional mechanism: unequal recognition of authority.

The available data do not permit an assessment of how strongly this pattern appeared in each participant's experience or whether some leadership settings were more open than others. Nevertheless, the theme is consistent with the paper's central argument that women's access to leadership depends partly on whether communities and institutions recognize women as legitimate decision-makers.

4.3 Family Support, Networks, Resources, and Gender Bias

The third theme brings together several practical constraints reported in the original analysis: limited family or community encouragement, restricted access to professional networks and resources, and gender bias or discrimination. These factors should be analytically separated even though they can reinforce one another. Family support operates primarily through household relationships and decisions; networks and resources are linked more directly to professional and organizational opportunity; and gender bias can operate across household, community, and workplace settings.

Support matters because leadership careers rarely develop in isolation. Encouragement, shared family responsibilities, permission or practical freedom to travel, and acceptance of public roles can affect whether women are able to pursue opportunities. Professional networks matter for a different reason: information, mentoring, sponsorship, visibility, and access to influential decision-makers often shape advancement. If women are excluded from informal spaces where professional relationships are formed, formal equality in recruitment may not translate into equal career progression.

Gender bias adds another layer. The source manuscript reports prejudicial assumptions about women's capabilities and potential. Such bias can affect evaluation, promotion, workplace climate, and the credibility granted to women's decisions. Together, these mechanisms show how a broad cultural expectation can be translated into concrete disadvantages: less support, weaker networks, fewer resources, and more skeptical evaluation. The current manuscript, however, does not establish which factor was most influential or how frequently each occurred.

4.4 Low Representation, Stereotypes, and Possibilities for Change

The fourth theme concerns low representation of women in leadership, persistent stereotypes, and the possibility of gradual change. Low representation can operate both as an outcome and a

mechanism of inequality. When few women occupy visible positions of authority, aspiring leaders have fewer role models and mentors, while organizations and communities have fewer routine examples of women exercising leadership. This can reinforce the stereotype that leadership is naturally male.

The original manuscript also presents a more optimistic strand, referring to growing awareness of gender equity, empowerment initiatives, organizational recognition of diversity, and the opportunities created by technology and social media. These points suggest that cultural norms are not necessarily fixed. The literature on women's participation in institutions such as the Khwendo Jirga also demonstrates that women can create or enter decision-making spaces within changing local arrangements (Gul & Fayaz, 2022).

However, the evidentiary status of the "opportunities" theme requires caution. The available versions do not show clearly which opportunity claims came directly from the four interviews and which were added by the author as contextual commentary. The strongest conclusion supported by the manuscript is therefore that the original analysis perceived some scope for change alongside continuing constraints. More detailed participant evidence would be needed to identify the mechanisms, conditions, and limits of that change.

5. DISCUSSION

Taken together, the findings support a multi-level interpretation of women's leadership in Swat. Traditional gender-role expectations operate through household responsibilities, mobility, and social definitions of appropriate public roles. Male-dominated authority concerns the distribution and recognition of decision-making power. Limited support, networks, and resources connect family relationships with organizational opportunity. Stereotypes and low representation can reproduce inequality by influencing both access to leadership and the social legitimacy granted to women who attain it. This layered interpretation is consistent with research on family structural norms, women's careers, educational leadership, and institutional barriers in Pakistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Ghazi et al., 2011; Shah & Shah, 2012; Taj, 2016; Sarwar & Imran, 2019).

The findings also clarify why "culture" should not be used as an all-purpose explanation. A cultural expectation becomes consequential through specific pathways. For example, an expectation that women prioritize family may reduce time for professional development or make travel difficult; an assumption that men are more suitable leaders may influence recruitment or the reception of a woman's decisions; gender-segregated social practices may restrict access to influential networks; and low representation may reduce mentoring and normalize male authority. Identifying these pathways makes the analysis more precise and creates clearer questions for future research and policy.

The feminist framework strengthens this interpretation by drawing attention to the relationship between formal leadership and socially recognized authority. De Beauvoir's account of women as socially positioned in relation to a male norm is relevant here because the reported themes repeatedly concern women being assessed against expectations that define men as more natural occupants of public authority. A feminist standpoint orientation further emphasizes that women leaders' experiences are analytically valuable precisely because formal entry into leadership does not necessarily remove the gendered conditions surrounding that role.

At the same time, the findings should not be converted into a single description of "Swat culture" or "Pashtun women." The study does not document enough participant information to compare experiences by sector, class, age, education, family background, or rural-urban locality. Nor does it include men, family members, employers, or community leaders whose perspectives might clarify how norms are produced, negotiated, or changing. The four cases are therefore useful

for identifying mechanisms and questions, not for estimating prevalence or claiming cultural uniformity.

The opportunity dimension deserves particular attention in future work. The original paper points to awareness, empowerment initiatives, organizational change, technology, and social media, while the literature documents women's participation in alternative or adapted decision-making institutions. Future research should examine when these openings translate into durable authority. It should ask whether opportunities expand women's access to senior positions, whether organizations change evaluation and promotion practices, whether family support shifts alongside women's careers, and whether greater visibility changes community perceptions of legitimate leadership.

For publication, the most important evidentiary improvement is the inclusion of participant-level material. Several short anonymized extracts under each theme would allow readers to see how participants expressed the issues, where their accounts converged, and where they differed. A participant table and clearer analytic description would also make it possible to connect themes to leadership settings without compromising confidentiality. These additions would substantially strengthen the paper without altering its core argument.

6. IMPLICATIONS

Although the study is exploratory, its mechanism-based analysis suggests several areas that merit attention. At the household and community level, women's leadership is more feasible where education, mobility, public participation, and professional ambition receive practical support rather than only rhetorical approval. At the organizational level, transparent recruitment and promotion, access to mentoring and professional networks, and fair evaluation of competence can reduce the effect of gendered assumptions. At the institutional level, women's inclusion in visible decision-making spaces can help expand the range of socially recognized leadership models.

These implications should not be treated as tested interventions arising directly from four interviews. Rather, they identify domains for future evidence-based action and research. Any specific recommendations for government, universities, employers, civil society, or community institutions should be developed using documented participant evidence and, ideally, additional stakeholder perspectives.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study has several important limitations. First, the sample consists of only four women leaders and cannot represent the diversity of women's experiences across Swat. Second, the supplied manuscript does not report key participant characteristics or detailed recruitment procedures, which limits assessment of sample variation. Third, the interview process is incompletely documented, including language, duration, setting, recording, transcription, and translation. Fourth, the manuscript does not provide verbatim quotations or case-level comparisons, making it difficult to independently assess the link between raw data and themes. Fifth, the analytic procedure is described only generally and does not provide a complete audit trail. Finally, the study includes only women leaders and therefore does not capture the perspectives of families, male colleagues, employers, community leaders, or women who sought leadership but were unable to enter it.

Future research should use larger and more diverse qualitative samples across leadership sectors and localities in Swat. Participant characteristics and research procedures should be reported transparently, while confidentiality is protected. Comparative designs could examine differences between public, private, educational, political, and civil-society leadership; between rural and urban settings; and between women at different career stages. Research should also

investigate supportive or divergent cases, not only barriers, to identify the conditions under which cultural norms are negotiated or changed. Mixed-method or multi-stakeholder research could then assess how widespread the identified mechanisms are and how they interact with organizational policy and family support.

8. CONCLUSION

This exploratory study examined how four interviewed women leaders understood the relationship between cultural norms and leadership in Swat. The reported analysis identifies traditional gender-role expectations, male-dominated authority, limited family and community support, restricted networks and resources, gender bias, stereotypes, and low representation as interconnected influences. These factors are best understood not as a single cultural barrier but as mechanisms operating across household, community, organizational, and wider institutional levels.

The study's central contribution is to show how gendered expectations can shape leadership through concrete pathways: the distribution of family responsibilities, the legitimacy granted to women's authority, access to professional relationships and resources, and the evaluation of competence. The source manuscript also points to possibilities for change, including greater awareness and emerging spaces for women's participation, but the evidence is insufficient to generalize the conditions under which such change occurs.

The conclusions are limited to the four cases as reported and should not be generalized to all women in Swat or treated as evidence of a homogeneous Pashtun culture. A stronger final research record would include participant profiles, transparent interview and ethics procedures, anonymized quotations, case comparisons, and a fuller analytic trail. With these additions, the paper's core argument—that women's leadership is shaped by interacting cultural and institutional mechanisms—could be tested and developed with substantially greater evidentiary depth.

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