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Invisible Citizens: Why More Women in Pakistan Do Not Vote

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Summary

Why does a gender gap in voting exist in Pakistan? Our research looks beyond the creation of democratic spaces for women's participation, such as voter registration, to look instead at the constraints that women face in being able to use such spaces. This paper uses qualitative fieldwork undertaken in Lahore over 2017–18 to understand what enables or constrains women's decision to turn out to vote. Standard explanations for Pakistan's large gender gap in political participation highlight overt restrictions imposed on women voters by male family and community members. We do not believe that these explanations are complete and look instead at more subtle processes that socialise women into non-political roles, and result in a 'gendered psyche' that makes women feel invisible and irrelevant to the electoral process. Constraints resulting from political engagement are usually underemphasised in academic and policy literature, and analysing their importance is a major contribution of this paper.

Keywords: Pakistan, elections, women's political participation, voting, gender gap.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

A4EA	Action for Empowerment and Accountability
AF	Aurat Foundation
ECP	Election Commission of Pakistan
FGD	focus group discussion
MNA	National Assembly Member
MPA	Provincial Assembly Member
NA	National Assembly
SAP-PK	South Asia Partnership Pakistan

1 The puzzle around women's political participation in Pakistan

One hundred years after the Representation of the People Act gave women suffrage in the UK, women in many parts of the world are still not exercising their right to vote. South Asian countries established universal suffrage around the same time many European countries did, and yet the gender gap remains high in parts of South Asia even today. But this is not true across all parts of the region. The gender gap in Pakistan remains particularly high, even growing in some parts, while that in India is reducing. Among the countries surveyed in the most recent wave of the World Values Survey, Pakistan has the largest gender gap (19.5 per cent) in self-reported voter turnout, whereas the gap in India was close to zero.

The general elections of 2013 and 2018 were landmarks in Pakistan's democratic history. Together they marked the first time that elections were held at regular and stipulated time gaps and allowed the transfer of power from one democratically elected government to another. They were each fiercely contested and had voters turn up in large numbers, leading to observations of some democratic consolidation in Pakistan. However, in each election attention turned to the fact that Pakistan's women voters did not engage with the electoral process to the same extent that men did, a fact that stands to undermine the principle of universal franchise and free elections. In the 2013 election, 95 per cent of registered women voters in 17 constituencies around the country did not cast their votes. In some cases, this was a result of explicit informal agreements between village leaders and political parties. However, even in the absence of outright bans, women lagged behind men in terms of voter registration and turnout.

According to the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), there were about 11 million fewer women than men registered as voters in the 2013 general elections. Worryingly, the gender gap in registered voters appeared to have grown since then. Electoral rolls published by the ECP in December 2016 indicated 12.2 million fewer women than men registered as voters, i.e. of a total 97 million citizens registered as voters, 54.6 million were men (56 per cent) and 42.4 million were women (44 per cent). This implies that for every 100 Pakistani men, there are only 78 women registered as voters. Efforts to improve this figure meant that by the time of the July 2018 election, 3.8 million more women were added to electoral rolls, but women were still only 44 per cent of the almost 106 million registered voters. Exacerbating this is the fact that there are sizeable gender gaps in participation even among registered voters. Only 45.7 per cent of registered women came out to vote in the national and provincial election on 25 July 2018, compared to 55 per cent of registered men, indicating that women's political participation is constrained by factors that go beyond the lack of legal identification.

Pakistan's continuing gender gap in political participation is puzzling because it exists even in areas that are undergoing structural transformation that has narrowed the gender gap in educational attainment. Hillygus (2005) and Sondheimer and Green (2010) have established a causal link between education and voter turnout, and though it is unclear that this works equally well outside the USA, it can be expected that an increase in women's education should at least help close the gender gap in voting. In 1990, the gender gap in educational attainment among young adults in Pakistan's urban areas was large (10 per cent), but within a period of 20 years this gap has virtually closed.¹ The narrowing gap in attainment has not, however, impacted women's political participation in urban areas. In fact, if anything the gender gap in voter registration is approximately 4.1 per cent higher in urbanised districts compared to more rural districts.² Furthermore, in large cities the gender gap in turnout

¹ Government of Pakistan Labour Force Survey (various issues).

² Lahore city compared to more rural districts with a population density of less than 300 people per km².

among registered voters also remains high, ranging between 10 per cent and 30 per cent. In Lahore, Pakistan's second largest city and the capital of Punjab, this gap was 12.9 per cent in 2013 and only slightly lower at 12.6 per cent in 2018, which is higher than the national gender gap of about 10 per cent.

This paper uses qualitative fieldwork undertaken in Lahore to unpack the causes underpinning the gender gap in political participation in a metropolitan city context. Our main focus is on understanding what enables or constrains women's decision to turn out to vote. Standard explanations for Pakistan's large gender gap in political participation highlight the use of overt restrictions against women voters imposed by male family and community members (Gazdar 2003; Bari 2005; Giné and Mansuri 2011). This is seen as a consequence of patriarchy and deeply embedded social norms. The challenge for these explanations is that patriarchy and social norms in metropolitan cities are not constraining women from going to school, so it is not obvious why they would impose overt sanctions against voting.

The standard explanation also stresses that another consequence of patriarchy is that women lack agency while voting. The argument is that women voters rubber stamp decisions made by male members of their families and communities. The evidence from Lahore again belies this claim. We were able to examine this claim in two constituencies where by-elections were held after the 2013 general elections.³ We analysed whether women in a neighbourhood voted the same way as men by comparing the direction of 'swing' in voting patterns between the 2013 general election and the by-election. This analysis is possible because a majority of polling stations in Lahore are gender segregated. We found the 'swing' in women's polling stations to be materially different from the 'swing' in men's polling stations.⁴ We also found that the vote share of extremist parties was smaller in women's polling stations (7.5 per cent of votes polled) than in men's (12 per cent of votes polled). This is not the behaviour of voters who lack agency.

These findings present a paradox; on the one hand fewer women are voting in Lahore in spite of their rising educational attainment, and on the other hand those that do vote exercise agency. In this paper we explore whether these paradoxes are explained by the existence of overt restrictions imposed by patriarchal structures or whether more subtle processes are playing out in metropolitan areas. Instead of being overtly constrained, is it that women, in spite of rising educational attainment, are strongly socialised into a non-political role? We explore the norms that underpin this form of socialisation in our context and examine the degree to which socialisation results from men and women occupying separate spheres – with women's domain being the private space of home and men dominating the public and political space (Spain 1993; Chhibber 2002; Gazdar 2003; Mumtaz and Salway 2009; Chopra and Zambelli 2017).

The question of barriers to women's political participation and representation has produced a robust literature that has long grappled with the issue of a gendered democratic deficit (Phillips 1991; Goetz and Nyamu-Musembi 2008; Goetz 2008). The important question for us is whether overt constraints or norms that result in subtler forms of gendered segregation have made women inherently less interested in political life. Are women destined to only act as peripheral or less engaged voters both in terms of interest and activity? Or is it that women are not inherently disinterested but their engagement with political life is shaped by multiple barriers – such as violence (Bardall 2011) and lack of information (Giné and Mansuri 2011) – that make them feel less integrated into the political community? In particular, we examine the impact of the gendered nature of party organisations and cadre bases. In recent

³ The two constituencies were NA 120 and NA 122. The NA 122 by-election was held in 2015 and the NA 120 by-election was held in 2017.

⁴ In NA 122 there was a 3 per cent increase in the victory margin of the ruling party, PML N, in women's polling stations compared to the 4.2 per cent decline in the margin in men's polling stations. In NA 120, the victory margin of the ruling party fell by a smaller magnitude in women's stations (7.5 per cent) compared to men's (18 per cent).

work we found that women are significantly less likely than men to have been contacted by political party workers in Lahore – since the 2013 election, only 3 per cent of female voters in our survey sample had contact with any political party worker as opposed to 17 per cent for men (Cheema *et al.* 2017). In the case of rural India, Prillaman (2017) suggests that patterns of mobilisation that exclude women develop in a system of ‘family-centred clientelism’ in which parties target households as units and seek only to mobilise the (usually male) head of household. We explore whether the exclusion of women from political contact is resulting in a ‘gendered psyche’ that makes women feel invisible and irrelevant to the electoral process. We also analyse whether this impacts women’s political participation by lowering their interest and motivation to engage in politics. Constraints resulting from political engagement are usually underemphasised and analysing their importance is a major contribution of this paper.

Unpacking the causes underpinning the high gender gap in political participation is important because a high gap not only undermines democratic principles of equality, but it also has consequences for service delivery and policy outcomes. Existing research from a variety of contexts shows that women hold systematically different preferences from men over state policy and what public goods and services they want to see provided in their communities. Gottlieb, Grossman and Robinson (2016) show that women in sub-Saharan Africa are more likely to prefer drinking water projects, and less likely than men to choose bridges and roads. Olken (2010) found similar patterns in Indonesia, and Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) in India, and they suggest that men’s and women’s differential preferences are based on the gendered division of labour in the household and in society. Eichenberg (2003) found that women had distinctly different preferences on issues of foreign policy and defence spending – they were less supportive of military interventions and more sensitive to the consequences of war than men. Cheema *et al.* (2017) find that even in Lahore women voters have very different service delivery preferences from men within the same household. Women attach a much higher priority than men to the provision of water, electricity, sanitation, and gas, and to environmental protection as the most important issues for politicians to focus on. Evidence from the US and Europe, following the extension of suffrage, suggests that when women participate in higher numbers as voters, policies shift in line with their distinctive preferences, which has the potential to transform relationships of influence and power (Corder and Wolbrecht 2016). The flip side of this is that if women systematically under-participate, their preferences risk going unheard and unrepresented.

Our research looks beyond the creation of democratic spaces for women’s participation to look instead at the constraints that women face in being able to use such spaces and exercise agency within them. Our qualitative investigation is led by a simple question — why does a gender gap in voting exist in Pakistan? We believe that answering this question allows us to interrogate the nature of the social contract that exists between women and the state in Pakistan, and that doing so in an urban context allows us a focused lens on the particularly tenacious constraints that women continue to face as citizens even when the more severe constraints that act on rural women are relaxed. The next section provides the details of our methodology, while section 3 presents the results of the qualitative research conducted in Lahore over 2017–18. The evidence suggests that women’s disengagement from the voting process results from not being perceived as a political constituency by political parties; an explanation that challenges the usual explanations forwarded in the literature that emphasise lack of information, purdah norms, and the gendered division of household work, and which are also used for voter education and other types of programmes. Finally, section 4 looks at what these results mean for current policy and concludes with some suggestions for further research.

2 Methodology and sampling

This project analyses constraints on women’s political participation as voters in the city of Lahore. We picked an urban area where the gender gap in voting has remained high, despite expectations, in order to unpack why women lag behind men in voting even in areas where they face fewer social constraints than in other parts of the country. Lahore presents a real puzzle; it is Pakistan’s second largest metropolitan centre, the capital of its most populous and politically most important province, Punjab, and a generally progressive city. And yet, the gender gap in voting here is higher than the national average.

Lahore had a total of 13 parliamentary constituencies, or national assembly (NA) seats, at the time of our research in early 2018.⁵ We picked three of these in the very centre of the city, an area that is densely populated and constituted largely around middle- and lower-income neighbourhoods. They were also selected to represent a variation in levels of competition, led by the assumption that political actors may behave differently with voters based on the level of competition they face. NA-122 was the second most closely contested constituency in Lahore in the 2013 election, NA-120 was the fifth most closely contested, and NA-124 the second least competitive constituency. Within each constituency we wanted to capture variation in women’s political participation by working in an area where women’s turnout in the 2013 election had been high and another where it had been low. We constructed a dataset on polling station level turnout and used this to randomly pick one high and one low turnout area from within a shortlist of the top four high and low turnout polling stations within each constituency. The final sample is presented in Table 2.1. Further, within each type of polling station we demarcated neighbourhoods as relatively higher-income and low-income. This strategy was based on the assumption that women’s political behaviour may be conditioned by the economic status of their family.

Table 2.1 Sample of study neighbourhoods

	Polling station (PS) name	Turnout (%)	
NA-120	PS WASA Office Katcha Ravi Road	32.92	Low
	PS Farooqi Girls High School Kareem Park Ravi Road	57.09	High
NA-122	PS Govt. Sheikh Sardar Higher Secondary School Garhi Shahu	42.93	Low
	PS Government Technical Training Institute, Pak German Centre, Mughalpura	67.80	High
NA-124	PS CDGL Girls Primary School, Mohallah Islamabad, Shadipura	37.12	Low
	PS Road Pir Shah, Mehmood Graveyard, Mehmood Booti	61.3	High

Source: IDEAS.

We used two types of qualitative methods to collect data for this study: focus group discussions (FGDs) with women, and open-ended interviews with men in the same localities. The choice of methods, and the decision to use different ones for men and women, are based on the results of our pilot in one constituency in Lahore city. We conducted our pilot during a by-election in NA-120 in September 2017, in which we observed that speaking to males in a focus group setting about women’s issues made them unresponsive. They would quickly deviate from the topic at hand and talk about more general political problems. This happened in a few focus groups, so we changed our strategy in the pilot and conducted one-on-one male interviews. In this setting, men were more comfortable discussing women’s

⁵ These have now been increased to 14 seats in a new delimitation of constituencies made before the July 2018 election. Pakistan has 272 directly contested parliamentary constituencies (not counting reserved seats for women and minorities in parliament). Each constituency is represented by a single member elected through majority vote in a first-past-the-post system.

political participation and issues. In contrast, speaking with women alone in one-on-one interviews did not draw them out the same way that a group setting did, in which they would quickly and enthusiastically get involved in the conversation. We also tried running mixed FGDs, to see if men and women would be able to discuss their different perspectives on women's political participation with one another. However, we discovered that in this mixed setting men quickly took over the discussion, and women tended to either remain quiet or then agree with the men.

Based on this experience, we decided that the most effective strategy was to run structured FGDs with women, and open-ended, conversational interviews with men. For the FGDs, we separated women by age group, speaking separately to women of over 35 years of age, and younger ones of less than 35 years. This was based on a concern that younger women may not speak openly in the presence of their mothers, mothers-in-law, aunts, and so on. In all, we conducted 24 FGDs with women (four per polling station across different age groups), and about 48 interviews with men (eight per polling station across different age groups) between late December 2017 and early March 2018. Both the FGD and interview instruments were developed iteratively over many rounds during the piloting phase. We worked closely with our partners Aurat Foundation (AF) and South Asia Partnership Pakistan (SAP-PK) in conducting these FGDs and interviews. SAP-PK helped organise these through their local networks, and AF helped conduct the FGDs with our team.

3 Evidence from the field

We supplemented the limited literature on women's political participation in Pakistan with discussions with members of civil society organisations, political parties, and relevant state bodies to develop three main hypotheses for why a gender gap exists in electoral turnout in Pakistan. The hypotheses we developed connect with key debates in the larger literature on constraints that limit women's political participation. These are: (a) patriarchy, as mediated through social norms and a gendered division of labour that draws women out of political processes (Kabeer 1994); (b) women's lack of political information and the difficulties of voting on election day (Giné and Mansuri 2011); and (c) women's general lack of interest in the political process (Lawless and Fox 2005; Preece 2016). Our FGDs and interviews were designed to test these hypotheses. We asked both women and men in our selected localities about each of these constraints, and present here the evidence we gathered. This evidence shows that while all three constraints exist and play a role, it is women's disillusionment with, rather than a lack of interest in, the political process that provides the most compelling explanation for why women do not vote more in Pakistan.

3.1 Patriarchy and other social norms

A popularly accepted reason for why women do not vote as much as men do in Pakistan is social conservatism and the restrictions that patriarchal social norms put on women's agency and mobility. Pakistan is categorised as a 'classic patriarchy' with all of its attendant restrictions on women, exercised through male control over female productive and reproductive work, and within which the household is a major site of control and contention (Momsen and Townsend 1987). This is manifested in various ways in terms of political behaviour – women are not expected to participate actively in politics, but are also not expected to step out of the house unless it is absolutely necessary. This is the practice of *purdah*, which refers not only to women veiling in public but also to the complete segregation of women and men, and restrictions on women interacting with non-familial male actors from outside the household; the concept of women belonging inside the *chaar diwari* (literally, four walls) that prevails in many northern South Asian societies.

Our evidence from the field in Lahore, however, reveals that this is a more nuanced story. While it is true that patriarchy exists and places constraints on women's political behaviour, this may not necessarily be manifested as restricting women's movement on an election day. In fact, we found great variation in this across the three constituencies of Lahore city where we worked. NA-120 seems to be more socially conservative than both NA-122 and NA-124 with greater restrictions on women's mobility and a stricter implementation of segregation. We asked about this during field discussions and probed it with our field team members from Aurat Foundation, who have worked in these areas for a while. Overt reasons for this include the fact that NA-120 has had a higher incidence of criminal activities, including child abductions, sexual assaults and known incidents of female trafficking over the last few years. This has led to an atmosphere of fear in the area that has manifested as stringent restrictions placed on women's free movement, even around their own neighbourhoods. A high incidence of drug usage especially in groups of men that hang around on street corners, and of sex workers, also works to dissuade women from moving around alone. One respondent explained, 'all we have is our respect and honour. I would rather keep my daughter at home' (FGD, 11-NA 120-PS, Katcha Ravi Road, 1 February 2018). 'It isn't just girls', explained another respondent, 'but also boys who cannot go anywhere alone these days' (FGD, 17-NA 120-PS, Kareem Park, 22 February 2018).

Women in NA-120 are particularly constrained. As one respondent put it, 'we do not even visit our own neighbours. We have no idea what is happening in other homes' (FGD, 10-NA 124-PS, Mehmood Booti, 25 January 2018). Another said, 'I am not allowed to leave my home... we don't even educate the girls in our family or let them go out' (FGD, 11-NA 120-PS, Katcha Ravi Road, 1 February 2018). When we asked another group in this constituency if they felt unsafe in their *mohalla* (community), one respondent said, 'when do we ever go out of our homes to have a problem with security in the neighbourhood?' (FGD, 19-NA 120-PS, Kareem Park, 26 February 2018).

The situation is much better in the other constituencies, and women are certainly more mobile, but patriarchal norms around gender roles are deeply ingrained in Lahore's lower-income neighbourhoods where we worked during this project. Such norms are imposed by men but also internalised by women, and it is not uncommon for women to say things like, 'men earn and we only eat', 'men and women can never be equal', and 'women's only role is to raise children' (FGD, 1-NA 122, Dars Barray Mian, 22 December 2017). They also say that 'according to men our only role is to check on how much salt there is in the food' (FGD, 11-NA 120-PS, Katcha Ravi Road, 1 February 2018). However, in the same neighbourhoods and often within the same discussion groups (within which women were of the same income and age group), we were also told that 'men and women are equal' (FGD, 11-NA 120-PS, Katcha Ravi Road, 1 February 2018), and that 'women can do anything if they want to. Women are strong and rather than staying at home, we should come out and help others because we can' (FGD, 4-NA 124-PS, Mehmood Booti, 2 January 2018). The variation in this case was usually connected to education levels.

An area of particular convergence across women in all constituencies is the need to seek permission from men in the household before engaging in any activity outside the home, or interacting with anyone outside it. This is more severe in NA-120 where women cannot step out of their homes alone, even to see neighbours. In the other constituencies, women were far more social and interacted more openly beyond the boundaries of their own home, but it was generally accepted that they should seek their husbands' permission in order to step out, even to drop off or pick their children up from school. Despite this, there was also a sense that such behaviour was expected only of uneducated men. Those that were educated were perceived to be less conservative, and 'did not impose restrictions on women in their households' (FGD, 10-NA 124-PS, Mehmood Booti, 25 January 2018).

Responses also varied across neighbourhoods in terms of whether or not they could attend a political gathering, or *ja/lsa*. In some places, largely in NA-120, women said that it would be hard for them to attend since their men (husbands, fathers, brothers, or even brothers-in-law in some cases) did not consider it appropriate for them to participate in mixed gatherings where lots of other men are also present. In one discussion women said that they would not even attend a corner meeting, and feared such events being covered by the media around election time because their reputation would be ruined if their family members saw them on television. Harassment at large gatherings and in public spaces was a concern for many women in different groups, and we were told that women are generally hesitant about stepping into public spaces because of '*sharam aur haya*' (shame and integrity) (FGD, 21-NA 122-PS, Garhi Shahu, 27 February 2018), which were at risk from men behaving badly and affecting their '*izzat*' (honour) (FGD, 20-NA 120-PS, Kareem Park, 26 February 2018).

In other neighbourhoods, women said that it would be okay for them to go if their men came along or with other women from their family, and in yet others, women seemed to have no issues at all with being able to participate. Women in NA-122 seemed to be diametrically different in their perspectives and in the extent of patriarchal restrictions under which they live. Here, neither attending a *ja/lsa* nor being part of a mixed gathering seemed to be difficult for women, especially those that were older. 'We only need to tell our men, not ask their permission', they said (FGD, 16-NA 122-PS, Garhi Shahu, 2 February 2018). A few women stated that it would be particularly easy for them to attend if political meetings were organised in their neighbourhood, and they would attend in particular if the focus were on the issues faced by women in their locality.

We asked women if it would make a difference if men asked them to vote. The response to this was overwhelmingly positive. Most women believed that it would help bring out greater numbers of women voters if men expressly encouraged their women to vote. One respondent suggested, 'men should simply take their wives along when they go to vote' (FGD, 21-NA 122-PS, Garhi Shahu, 2 February 2018). Women in more conservative parts believed that needing permission from men in their families to vote may be a reason why more women did not vote, but at the same time, women in many discussions said that men in their locality were supportive of women going out to vote, and as an activity, voting was not discouraged. Others said that it was essentially their own decision and if they wanted to vote, men would not stop them, and in yet others 'men insist that we vote so that our vote is not wasted' (FGD, 12-NA 120-PS, Katcha Ravi Road, 1 February 2018). This happens when men identify strongly with a party. One respondent said, 'my brother insists that I vote so that PML-N will win' (FGD, 12-NA 120-PS, Katcha Ravi Road, 1 February 2018).

The variation on whether or not women were restricted by men from voting across both female and male respondents was quite large. Many men seemed to agree that some women might not be voting because they are expressly forbidden to do so by the men of their household. One male respondent explained,

There are a lot of women who aren't allowed (to vote) by their households [referring to men]. Mostly elder women go out and vote, very few young women go out and vote because a lot of younger women don't get permission to go. The women in our household also don't go and place their vote because we don't allow them to.
(Male interview, 3-NA 124-PS, Mehmood Booti, 17 January 2018)

Many women dismissed purdah as a reason for why women did not vote, claiming, 'one can vote even while wearing a veil that covers one's face' (FGD, 16-NA 122-PS, Garhi Shahu, 2 February 2018). They seemed to be equally dismissive of the fact that security concerns on election day kept them home, or the fact that polling stations were not segregated. Security concerns certainly exist, but these seem to be greater in general on a day-to-day basis, rather than being specific to an election day. Barring a few respondents, most said that it did

not matter if the polling station was mixed or segregated or if there were risks to security: 'those who have decided to vote, will ultimately vote despite all odds' (FGD, 16-NA 122-PS, Garhi Shahu, 2 February 2018). In fact, one respondent even said, 'there are so many women at the polling stations and the security arrangement is tight' (FGD, 16-NA 122-PS, Garhi Shahu, 2 February 2018). Others in the group agreed with this observation.

Men, on the other hand, seemed far more concerned both with the security situation at polling stations, and women's need to maintain purdah. Most men spoke of security in terms of purdah for women (segregation of men and women) at the polling station, and stated that due to there being too many men at polling stations (voters, party officials) they were not comfortable with allowing women to go out and cast their vote. Men being unhappy with the arrangements for women at polling stations was a response that was repeated a number of times during the interviews. Some also pointed out that 'some women who observe purdah do not think it is right for them to leave the house (to vote)' (male interview, 1-NA 124-PS, Shadipura, 29 December 2017), while some others suggested that it was not deemed appropriate for women to cast votes in a joint (men and women) polling station. As one respondent put it,

Some men do not allow their women to cast their votes because the polling stations are crowded with men and they don't find it appropriate that their women will have to walk through a crowd of men.

(Male interview, 5-NA 124-PS, Mehmood Booti, 18 January 2018)

A few men discussed the lack of appropriate arrangements for women at polling stations for streamlining their voting process and making them feel more comfortable. Similarly, most men stated that women do not attend political rallies because either they are not comfortable sending the women, or women themselves would not attend a public gathering where there were so many men. This view was more prevalent in areas where turnout was low in the 2013 election. A respondent stated that he would not allow the women of his household to attend a mixed *jalসা* but would consider sending them if it was a segregated gathering (male interview, 4-NA 124-PS, Shadipura, 29 December 2017).

While men claimed that the lack of segregated spaces makes women so uncomfortable that they do not want to cast a vote, these did not come across as equally significant concerns for women. Most women seemed to dismiss the security situation at polling stations, long procedures, community pressure against women voting, and permissions from men as the main reasons for why they did not vote more in these neighbourhoods.

Similarly, while both men and women pointed out how household chores reduced both women's time for and interest in voting, it was mostly men who really stressed the gendered division of labour as a factor. Women talked about how their responsibilities left little time for anything else, including political participation. Said one, 'half of women's interests and hobbies die after marriage' (FGD, 21-NA 122-PS, Garhi Shahu, 27 February 2018). Most discussants believed that a woman's prime responsibility is to take care of her home, and that involvement in activities beyond the confines of her home are not considered appropriate. 'Ambitious' women were particularly frowned upon and viewed as the opposite of a good home-maker who prioritised domestic responsibilities (FGD, 4-NA 124-PS, Shadipura, 2 January 2018).

Men were more emphatic in stressing that household chores did not leave women any time to vote. One male respondent summed this up by stating,

Women have a lot of responsibilities in the household which are difficult to leave unattended for voting purposes; they have to cook and look after children, and therefore it becomes very difficult for them to step out of the house.

(Male interview, 3-NA 120-PS, Katcha Ravi Road, 15 February 2018)

Another said, 'even if women want to vote, they can't because of their young children' (male interview, 6-NA 124- PS, Mehmood Booti, 18 January 2018). For women, mobility was a daily issue and not one that could not be solved on election day itself through the sharing of household chores with other women in joint family systems or in the neighbourhood, but men used household chores very often in the interviews to explain why women did not vote. Men's responses, more than women's, underscored norms around the division of labour between private and public spheres, whereby the women's first responsibility is the household and men will not participate in these chores for even one day.

Women in all three constituencies did not overwhelmingly believe that they were forbidden to vote by men, or that they could not participate in politics if they really wanted to. Gendered societal roles are deeply ingrained — women belong in the private sphere of the home, and men in the public sphere of the neighbourhood and the larger city. This places a disproportionate burden of household responsibilities on women, and of motivating them out of the private and into the public sphere on men — an action that men find hard to consider in the presence of shared societal norms that actively discourage it. And yet, despite all this, patriarchal norms and gendered roles were not considered to be the primary constraint on women's political participation. A majority of our respondents across all three constituencies believed that the real reason for why women did not vote had less to do with the men in their households and more to do with the fact that women did not seem convinced about voting. Why this is so is discussed in Section 3.3.

3.2 Women's political knowledge, logistics, and election day issues

We found that women's political knowledge did not lag greatly, though it was better for older women than younger women, and once again, men thought that this was a greater constraint on voting than women did. To gauge political knowledge, we asked the respondents to identify representatives at three levels of government for their constituency; the National Assembly Member (MNA), the Provincial Assembly Member (MPA) and the Local Government Chairperson. All three of these representatives are elected through a direct public vote and should be politically visible in the area. The identification of these representatives was used as a proxy to determine the extent of our respondents' political knowledge and awareness. Most women seemed to know some, though not all, of the political actors we asked them about. Respondents were usually able to name the MNA easily, but very few knew the name of their MPA, or even their union chairperson or councillor, though these were named more often than the MPA. Women would usually confer with each other after we asked them to name their political representatives, two or three would then eventually name their MNA correctly, thus reminding others of his/her name, but almost no one was able to name their MPA, or then named him/her for the wrong post (often as the chairperson of their union). Many women excused their lack of knowledge of these personalities by saying, 'we don't usually pay attention to such details', or that 'our husbands know who they are' (FGD, 11-NA 120-PS, Katcha Ravi Road, 1 February 2018). Most often their lack of knowledge seemed to stem from their disengagement from the political, public world, rather than the other way around — it was not their lack of knowledge that was keeping them away from politics. So, we were often told, 'what is the point of knowing these things, it won't fix anything' (FGD, 11-NA 120-PS, Katcha Ravi Road, 1 February 2018).

Women's knowledge of the voting process, what ballot papers look like, and what happens at polling stations was much better. To gauge their knowledge of the electoral process, we asked respondents whether the ballot paper had a photo of the candidate, and most women were able to correct us and said that ballot papers have party symbols and not candidate photographs. Many also knew that polling station information could be accessed on their phones through an SMS a few days before the election, and so identifying which one they had to go to was fairly easy.

Very few women feared that the length of the process would take a toll on their families and would add to the pressure of domestic responsibilities levied on them. While they suggested that awareness campaigns would make women more comfortable about voting, most women did not feel that election day logistics, mobility or security was a constraining factor in casting a vote, 'it is easy for me to go to the polling station'; 'we don't have any issue with the security aspect at polling station'; 'the men in our family take us to vote' (FGD, 12-NA 120-PS, Katcha Ravi Road, 1 February 2018). Both men and women mentioned that many party workers also provide transportation, 'a pick and drop service', for women to the polling stations on election day (though in many cases the journey back home is their own responsibility) (FGD 20-NA 120-PS, Kareem Park, 26 February 2018; male interview, 6-NA 122-PS, Garhi Shahu, 27 February 2018). A few women are discomforted by the process, some because of the crowds of men at polling stations, and others because of the attitude of polling station staff. One respondent recalled how abuses were hurled at female voters by staff and remembered that they called women voters '*jahil* (ignorant/illiterate) (FGD, 6-NA 124-PS, Mehmood Booti, 17 January 2018). Long lines and the time it took to actually cast a vote also dissuaded a few women, but this was not common.

There were also a handful of women who talked about issues to do with erroneous electoral rolls, or confusion about which polling station they were meant to vote at. A respondent explained that,

Some women's votes were transferred to other polling stations and they were unaware of this. They wasted all day in line and came away without voting, and their votes too were wasted in the process.

(FGD, 9-NA 124-PS, Mehmood Booti, 25 January 2018)

Others complained about the fact that it was a problem when polling stations are at a great distance or segregated, so that men and women of the same family have to go to different locations. This particularly affects women who are unwilling to move around independently, though others said that groups of women from the same neighbourhoods hire rickshaws and go together. Older women complained about accessibility issues at the polling stations, pointing out that the polling process was very difficult for people in wheelchairs or with other disabilities. There are few or no special facilities or staff instructed to help voters that need special assistance, and this generally affects older voters more than younger ones.

Men played up women's lack of awareness with regards to the process of casting a vote as a constraint for why many women did not vote. A few men suggested that as women did not know the process of casting a vote, they either waste their vote or return without casting it. Similarly, they also talked about how long distances and transportation issues dissuaded women from voting. Interestingly, men did not reflect very much on why they did not facilitate these journeys, or educate women in their families on how to cast a vote. 'Polling stations are usually at a distance, so a lot of women don't step out to vote', said one man (male interview, 4-NA 122-PS, Mughalpura, 2 March 2018; male interview, 6-NA 124-PS, Mehmood Booti, 18 January 2018), while another said, 'women who do not cast a vote are restricted because their polling stations are at a distance, to which transportation arrangements aren't adequate' (male interview, 8-NA 122-PS, Garhi Shahu, 27 February 2018). When polling stations are close by, these issues disappear. According to men, the distance to a polling station, cost of the journey and limited resources is a determining factor for voting by women in their families. At the same time, some men believe that the time taken to vote is not great and is easily managed, neither is transportation an issue, so this does not necessarily weigh in on women's lack of motivation to vote.

3.3 Women's political engagement

By far the most common responses for why there is a gender gap in voting had to do with women's sense of citizenship and civic responsibility, and the ways in which these have been eroded by the fact that women feel invisible to politicians and political parties. Responses to this effect far outweighed issues of a lack of knowledge or being unfamiliar with the electoral process, though these also exist. When we asked about the kinds of changes in behaviour and norms that can encourage more women to vote, our respondents pointed overwhelmingly to the behaviour of political actors, and not at issues within their households.

At the beginning of each FGD, we provided women with the percentage of registered women who had turned out in their locality for the 2013 election and the magnitude of the gender gap, and asked their opinion on why they thought this existed. The most commonly provided reason for this is best described as the feeling of being left out of the political process and being invisible to the state and to political actors. In one FGD we were told that all the campaigns leading up to the 2013 elections were focused on men and the issues they faced. In another we were told that 'no one talks to women when it comes to asking for votes, all the persuading and luring tactics are used on men' (FGD, 8-NA 124-PS, Mehmood Booti, 24 January 2018). This makes a difference, they told us, because,

Men have different issues than women. If a politician approaches a man in this community and asks about his needs, the man might say he wants better roads to be constructed or maybe there should be a graveyard in the vicinity. If the same question is asked of a woman, she will have different demands and she will ask for a school or a hospital to be constructed in the neighbourhood.

(FGD, 10-NA 124-PS, Mehmood Booti, 25 January 2018)

And yet, 'no one comes to talk to us' (FGD, 13-NA 120-PS, Katcha Ravi Road, 15 February 2018).

The general sense was that if party workers and politicians had engaged more with local women, their turnout in 2013 would have been better, and that if this was their aim for the 2018 election, then parties would need to come and speak with women directly about their needs. Women have almost no direct interaction with political actors. Parties are largely represented by male party workers who engage with men outside the home; politicians spend no substantial time in constituencies with anyone, and certainly not with women; and even at election time, politicians move through the neighbourhoods without directly engaging with women on substantial issues. One respondent explained,

Most political party members and workers talk to the men in our families and do not attempt to engage with us. We would appreciate it if someone made an effort to communicate with us women, and if we find some merit in what they are saying, we will support them regardless of the political party.

(FGD, 5-NA 124-PS, Shadipura, 2 January 2018)

Another added, 'if a woman politician or party worker comes to us and talks to us about our issues, we will be encouraged to vote and will definitely vote' (FGD, 10-NA 124-PS, Mehmood Booti, 25 January 2018). In a similar vein, another confirmed, 'if they give us our rights and deal with our needs, then even those who aren't motivated to vote will go out to vote' (FGD, 19-NA 120-PS, Kareem Park, 26 February 2018). Referring to the last election, a woman said,

If only Rohail Asghar [MNA] or Irfan Bhatti's [union chairperson] wives had come and talked to us, we would not have felt so hopeless about this whole process.

(FGD, 8-NA 124-PS, Mehmood Booti, 24 January 2018)

In another group a discussant made an interesting point about the fact that ‘everyone says that the *izzat* (respect) of a household comes from a woman. But no one thinks or cares about women’ (FGD, 11-NA 120-PS, Katcha Ravi Road, 1 February 2018). In another discussion, a woman said, ‘women have no value in this political process so they don’t bother with us’ (FGD, 21-NA 122-PS, Garhi Shahu, 27 February 2018). The issue of why women did not vote, was therefore, connected to a palpable sense of hopelessness and disengagement. While some respondents had a clear preference for women from political parties coming to speak to them, many said that it did not matter whether it was a man or woman, as long as they talked to them directly about their party’s manifesto and how they will deliver services for the welfare of their community. What matters most, they said, was that they engage with us. ‘That is what matters, and not whether it is a man or a woman’ (FGD, 6-NA 124-PS, Mehmood Booti, 17 January 2018). Women seemed unanimous in their opinion that to prompt change in their behaviour, party activists and leaders had to target more women in their campaigns. They had some concrete suggestions around this,

Perhaps the government should constitute a team of people who are tasked with the responsibility of talking with the women of this area and asking them about the issues that they face in their community.

(FGD, 16-NA 122-PS, Garhi Shahu, 2 February 2018)

And, ‘there should be small centres within neighbourhoods where women can register a complaint and demand action’ (FGD, 17-NA 120-PS, Kareem Park, 22 February 2018).

Women pointed out repeatedly, in every discussion and in every constituency, that they are a severely under-provided for group. The neighbourhoods we worked in had poor access to public provision in general, and this affected both men and women, but women were very clear on the fact that their preferences are different from those of men, and that it is particularly the services that most affect their lives inside their homes that are under-provided. This then leads to increased pressure on their workload: lack of clean drinking water means added work around getting it from municipal pumps (though in some neighbourhoods the distance is so large that this falls to the men); lack of good sewerage systems adds extra work in keeping their homes clean and food safe; lack of solid waste management adds an extra burden of getting rid of garbage and keeping the entrances to their homes usable and presentable; and irregular gas supply means that meals are not ready on time and families cannot be fed. All of this leads to delays in regular household chores that then lead to domestic discord. One woman summed up the sentiments of many when she said, ‘these issues are only a burden for women because it multiplies our stress of running the household. All of our work stops, we waste a lot of time’ (FGD, 15-NA 122-PS, Garhi Shahu, 2 February 2018). Another woman added, ‘men leave in the morning, these issues are all for us women. Men don’t realise how hard things are at home’ (FGD, 7-NA 124-PS, Mehmood Booti, 24 January 2018; FGD, 20-NA 120-PS, Kareem Park, 26 February 2018). A major issue is that women bear the brunt of men’s anger when, for example, a shortage of gas and water means that the food is not ready on time, or clothes are not washed or ironed when there is no electricity for 12 hours a day. Also, when sewerage systems do not work or if there is no running water,

Men can go to the mosque to use the toilet, but we cannot go anywhere else, even if it is working in our neighbour’s house.

(FGD, 21-NA 122-PS, Garhi Shahu, 27 February 2018)

Women, therefore, bear a double burden of the under-provision of public services: they are deprived of basic services themselves, but also bear the responsibility of keeping their households operational under circumstances that they have no control over. Women discussed changes in sleeping hours so that they could ensure water was collected for the

day at public taps during the hours in which it was available, or that food was cooked early in the day when the gas supply is better.

Women make easy connections between their increased workloads and the under-provision of local services by the state. For this they blame both municipal and higher-tier governments, and especially the party in power ('the ruling party is responsible for addressing these issues that we face' (FGD, 16-NA 122-PS, Garhi Shahu, 2 February 2018)), insisting that they have not been provided for by any party or government. This leads to a general apathy towards the political process, and a quite serious disillusionment with political parties. 'What is the point of voting? What will we get from this process?' is a general, and incredibly common, refrain expressed by women across age and income group, and across constituencies (FGD, 9-NA 124-PS, Mehmood Booti, 25 January 2018). Resentment towards political leaders and politics in general is palpable everywhere, and as one group explained, 'the whole neighbourhood has collectively decided not to vote in the upcoming election' (FGD, 20-NA 120-PS, Kareem Park, 26 February 2018). This apathy is amply clear not just in the lack of desire to engage with the electoral process, but also in their responses to our questions about what they think of the word 'politics'. Regular responses included phrases like, 'filling your own stomach', 'fraud', 'lies', 'false promises', 'greed', 'corruption', 'a bad thing', 'a waste of time', and 'deceiving people into believing that which is not true' (FGD, 20-NA 120-PS, Kareem Park, 26 February 2018; FGD, 18-NA 120-PS, Kareem Park, 22 February 2018; FGD, 19-NA 120-PS, Kareem Park, 26 February 2018; FGD, 8-NA 124-PS, Mehmood Booti, 24 January 2018; FGD, 17-NA 120-PS, Kareem Park, 22 February 2018; FGD, 21-NA 122-PS, Garhi Shahu, 27 February 2018; FGD, 10-NA 124-PS, Mehmood Booti, 25 January 2018). Positive responses to the word were few and far between.

Quotes that attested to their disillusionment were plentiful, and included the following:

These people only come to us for their own selfish reasons. Once they get their vote, they never come to us. This time I have decided not to vote for anyone.
(FGD, 8-NA 124-PS, Mehmood Booti, 24 January 2018)

Why should we vote if our issues aren't resolved?
(FGD, 19-NA 120-PS, Kareem Park, 26 February 2018)

I just don't feel like voting. To make us feel like they are doing something for us, they dig up our streets and lay some pipes, and then after the election, once we have voted, they don't care whether these work or not. We never see them again.
(FGD, 19-NA 120-PS, Kareem Park, 26 February 2018)

They run away with our votes. Before an election they remove the lids from our gutters, and then after the election they put the same lids back and tell us how they have solved our problems by protecting us from falling into open gutters.
(FGD, 10-NA 124-PS, Mehmood Booti, 25 January 2018)

We will vote when our problems are addressed.
(FGD, 4-NA 124-PS, Shadipura, 2 January 2018)

One day they come visit us to convince us to vote for them, only to never return to our doorstep again. Why should we vote for people like them?
(FGD, 13-NA 120-PS, Katcha Ravi Road, 15 February 2018)

If someone doesn't come to help us in our time of need then in turn we don't feel the necessity to vote for them. I chose to waste my vote in the last election for this very reason. There are better things to do with life than to vote.
(FGD, 13-NA 120-PS, Katcha Ravi Road, 15 February 2018)

Female workers come to ask about our vote, not about our issues.
(FGD 14-NA 120-PS, Katcha Ravi Road, 15 February 2018)

The next time they come to ask me for my vote, I am going to ask them to come live with us – we have no water, no gas, our roads are so bad that guests refuse to visit.
(FGD, 4-NA 124- PS, Shadipura, 2 January 2018)

Maryam Nawaz [a leader of the ruling PML-N who had campaigned recently during a by-election] wears a dupatta worth 18 lac rupees [about £11,000], while we can't afford a basic cotton suit. Unemployment and poverty is rife here and our leaders live a life of extravagance, and they ask for our votes.
(FGD, 13-NA 120-PS, Katcha Ravi Road, 15 February 2018)

Women seemed particularly irritated, rather than comforted, by the fact that politicians turn up at their doorsteps in election years. 'They only come to ask for votes. If they come after the elections and actually work to fix the state of our neighbourhoods, they may get more votes' (FGD, 15-NA 122-PS, Garhi Shahu, 2 February 2018). This sentiment was repeated many times in different forms, as attested by the quotes above.

Interestingly, men seemed to agree with the perception that women in particular were invisible to politicians. A male respondent stated, 'the reason the turnout of women is low is because the women feel that the politicians aren't listening to their issues. Thus, they don't feel the need to go out and vote for them' (male interview, 8-NA 122-PS, Mughalpur, 2 March 2018). Another said, 'women feel that they are not a part of the political scene. Politicians don't talk about women and thus they feel excluded' (male interview, 5-NA 122-PS, Garhi Shahu, 27 February 2018).

Women in all three constituencies drew very clear connections between negligence by political parties, the state of governance, and their voting behaviour. An absolutely common sentiment was that 'improved service delivery is the only way to encourage women to vote' (FGD, 8-NA 124-PS, Mehmood Booti, 24 January 2018). We were told that when there are stark contrasts between the lifestyles of the ruling party and the ruled, and when social wrongs like nepotism and corruption are on the rise, the government will never be able to fulfil its responsibility in eradicating the problems that their constituents face every day. A woman who seemed very influential in her neighbourhood said that if their problems were solved, she would ensure that everyone from their community would vote. 'My word carries more weight here than that of men!' (FGD, 8-NA 124-PS, Mehmood Booti, 24 January 2018).

Women are not unaware of the value of their vote, or the fact that this is a civic duty. They are aware of the importance of their vote and that it has been instrumental in electing politicians. In NA-120, where a by-election had recently brought ex-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's wife to the national assembly, women in one group said that they knew that she had won because of their vote, and if they had voted differently, someone else would have won. They said they wanted to vote for change and improvement, but no one ever seemed to do anything differently once the election was over. This was despite the fact that even in this more conservative locality, women had visited local party offices to register complaints about public services. These had been ignored by party workers who, as gatekeepers, did not allow them any access to higher tier politicians. 'Candidates are doing nothing with regard to our issues', said one woman (FGD, 20-NA 120-PS, Kareem Park, 26 February 2018). 'They gave us so much stress. We went to their party office to complain about issues but they just

ignore us' (FGD, 18-NA 120-PS, Kareem Park, 22 February 2018). Women in NA-122 said that they had a similar experience in approaching their MNA.

There was also wholehearted support for women participating in politics as workers, councillors and candidates, rather than as only voters. 'Women can understand the needs of a daughter and a mother, why can't they participate in politics?' said one respondent (FGD, 4-NA 124-PS, Shadipura, 2 January 2018), while another added, 'if women can manage a household, they can do anything. My community would support women who want to take up leadership roles in politics' (FGD, 4-NA 124-PS, Shadipura, 2 January 2018). Another added, 'if a woman can fight with her husband for her rights, then she can surely put up a fight for her country' (FGD, 13-NA 120-PS, Katcha Ravi Road, 15 February 2018), and yet another suggested that 'we women need to unite and become one team to get our problems solved' (FGD, 13-NA 120-PS, Katcha Ravi Road, 15 February 2018). They suggested that women from their own community should represent them, as they would relate more to their problems and would push for them to be resolved. None of them, however, thought that this could actually be them, given their familial and household responsibilities, and the fact that those women who engage actively in politics are not considered 'good' by society (FGD, 21-NA 122-PS, Garhi Shahu, 27 February 2018). One said, 'if a woman decides to go into politics men here will say, look at what so and so's wife or sister is up to' (FGD, 4-NA 124-PS, Shadipura, 2 January 2018). Other respondents stated that although their mothers, sisters or daughters would support them if they took this initiative, other women in their community, as well as women belonging to their in-laws' families, would be at the helm of driving a propaganda against them. Women did not in principle disagree with political participation, but simply did not see this as part of their set of options and opportunities, 'only firm and strong women participate in politics', they said (FGD, 21-NA 122-PS, Garhi Shahu, 27 February 2018).

A major constraint according to them was their lack of education. They thought that it was educated women that needed to represent them so that they know how to engage with the world outside their homes, and that this precluded most of the women we were speaking to. One respondent suggested,

Educated and intelligent women need to take part in politics rather than ordinary illiterate women, because they would be in a better position to understand and rally for women issues, and convey them properly.
(FGD, 21-NA 122-PS, Garhi Shahu, 27 February 2018)

Another said, 'had we been educated, had we some contact with other people, we may have been in politics ourselves' (FGD, 15-NA 122-PS, Garhi Shahu, 2 February 2018). A respondent suggested, 'one strong woman needs to come into politics and get rid of all these men' (FGD, 21-NA 122-PS Garhi Shahu, 27 February 2018). There was quite a lot of resentment about the lack of education opportunities, especially in terms of a lack of good quality options, and the fact that this limits their options in life.

An example of the role that education and mobility can play was provided in one of our discussions in the different viewpoints of two of our respondents. Attiya and Tahira are both 18 years old and live in the same neighbourhood under very similar conditions. But while Attiya has studied up to grade 10, and went out every morning with her father, a fruit vendor, to help him set up and run his stall, Tahira has read only up to grade 4, and is now entirely house bound. This seems to define their different world views, Attiya believes that men and women are equal and wants to engage more with politics, while Tahira believes that women can never be the equal of men, and that politics is a male domain. Such comparisons were evident in some of the other discussion groups too.

In terms of men's perception of female political participation, we found interesting variation across areas where women's turnout had been high in 2013 and where it had been low. In high turnout areas, male perception was mostly positive while in low turnout areas men seemed to have a negative and discouraging attitude towards the idea of women in politics. A recurring response from the high turnout areas was that women should definitely go out and vote, with some men also suggesting that women should participate in politics, attend political rallies and stand for elections. One male respondent stated, 'women should participate in politics because women have as much of a right over this country as men do' (male interview, 2-NA 122-PS, Mughalpura, 2 March 2018). They insisted though that women who wanted to stand for political positions should be educated and possess adequate knowledge about politics, which the women of their families did not have. Reactions were far more negative in low turnout areas. A respondent stated that 'women should not go out and vote as this goes against the Islamic principle of purdah' (male interview, 1-NA 124-PS, Shadipura, 29 December 2017). Another respondent stated that,

...politics is a male domain and women shouldn't aspire to enter the political arena as they would have to come out in public and attend meetings which is not appropriate for purdah.

(Male interview, 2-NA 124-PS, Shadipura, 29 December 2017)

He also stated that he personally would not vote for a woman for the same reasons. Interestingly, at the same time, most respondents from both types of areas agreed that it was a good thing that some political workers were women because they could come to the house and give political information to women in a safe environment.

4 Policy implications of these findings and future research

What constrains women in Pakistan from using democratic political spaces and exercising agency within them? Our evidence from the field in Lahore points to a few factors that come together to restrict women's active political participation, but by far, the strongest explanation stems from their disillusionment with the political process and their strong perception of the fact that they are not seen as a constituency by political parties. Women's disengagement from politics and political actors is the most proximate factor to the outcome defined by the gender gap in voting. Other factors also play a role: patriarchal social norms are visible in all three constituencies, women's mobility is restricted in many areas, and there is a gendered division of labour and a lack of opportunity for women in terms of social and economic mobility. However, rather than directly affecting women's political participation, these factors work together to put up unusually high walls around women that restrict them to private spaces and that make public spaces the exclusive domain of men. These walls disengage women from politics, restrict their active exercise of citizenship, and make them invisible to political actors – women do not cross these walls to engage with actors in the public space, and political parties do not cross them either to directly engage with women in the private space. This has created a gap between political actors and women voters that has led to women's complete disillusionment with electoral participation, which in turn has drawn them out of the political process. A vicious cycle exists in which women are voting in lower numbers as they do not feel motivated because politicians are not targeting them, and politicians are not targeting them because they do not see women as visible constituents.

Even when we asked specifically about the need for behavioural change in men and the impact of restrictive social norms, our women respondents insisted that these would not matter if political parties would engage with them directly and fulfil the promises they make at

election time. Women have enough agency within households to be able to convince men to let them vote, but they see little point in fighting these battles for a process that has largely excluded them. Interestingly, their current disengagement from the electoral process does not preclude the desire to engage with political parties and personalities in the future. Most welcomed the idea of political candidates engaging with them on their needs, and the fact that genuine engagement could lead them to become more active and interested participants in the political process.

Far from being uninformed, women drew out complicated political theories with ease in group discussions. They discussed the long route of accountability by pointing out that politicians are primarily responsible for what they do not have, and politicians are the only ones who, in return for the vote, can put pressure on bureaucratic offices to provide more services. They spoke about the impact of growing inequality, their rights as equal citizens, and the fact that they were owed far more by their elected representatives. And, most interestingly, they connected their own political invisibility to the fact that most policies were skewed in favour of men's preferences, pointing out that this is why we see more roads and bridges being built in the city than schools and hospitals. Women in Lahore's lower-income neighbourhoods seem to clearly understand the nature of accountability bargains that occur between political actors and citizens. Their lack of interest in engaging through more political action is intrinsically connected to what they perceive is a complete lack of accountability of politicians to their expressed needs as voters. Our evidence suggests that for women to turnout in larger numbers, they must feel included in the political process and must be able to see how their political participation can strengthen the accountability bargain.

There are two main sets of policy implications of our findings that are relevant to work on increasing women's political participation in Pakistan. The first of these is about how community members are engaged in interventions. Many civil society and donor projects tend to focus exclusively on women, and do so at the community level. Our evidence suggests that men continue to be gatekeepers of women's engagement with public spaces and activities, and that this suggests that working with both men and women is required to increase women's voting. Further, such efforts need to be taken to households rather than just communities so that they are not skewed towards individuals who are already motivated and face relatively few constraints to participation. Since many women need permission to leave their home for any reason, interventions need to be taken into the home in order to ensure that they reach those who are less likely to be motivated to participate due to low contact and exposure outside the home.

The second set of implications is about the substantive message of such interventions. Many interventions in past elections have emphasised voting as a civic duty and as a basic right of women. Our evidence suggests that women may be far more responsive to messages that emphasise their role in strengthening the accountability bargain with their representatives. Encouraging women to vote as the first step in building stronger accountability relationships with politicians, and as a way for them to become more visible as constituents, may be a more effective strategy. Our respondents' sense that 'politics is not relevant to me' or 'my participation won't make a difference' may be addressed by emphasising the link between everyday service delivery issues and the political accountability chain. Therefore, the key may lie in emphasising the potential impact of participation and of making louder demands on the accountability of political actors and the type of policies that are made and implemented.

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