Women Empowerment, Mental Health, And Political Sustainability: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis In Pakistan

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Abstract
This study presents an in-depth Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) conducted in Pakistan that explores the interconnected constructs of women's empowerment, political sustainability, and mental health. In the study, lived experiences of eight women volunteers from different backgrounds rural and urban represent different age groups and socioeconomic statuses. Through semi-structured interviews and in-depth theme analysis, this study investigates the lived experiences, attitudes, and challenges these people faced navigating the complexities of gender roles, mental health, and political engagement within Pakistani society.
The IPA's findings highlight several important issues. First, participants in the discussion of women's empowerment suggest varying degrees of agency and empowerment in many areas of their lives, which are influenced by social standards, educational opportunities, and resource accessibility. Second, the participants discuss coping mechanisms, the stigma attached to mental health issues, and the ways in which society's expectations impact their psychological well-being with regard to mental sustainability. Thirdly, participants talk about their opinions on political institutions, their own political experiences, and their aspirations for a more inclusive and responsive political system in relation to political sustainability.
The examination of participant narratives highlights the intricate connections between these themes, emphasizing the relationship between mental health, political participation, and women's empowerment. The research adds to a better knowledge of the obstacles and possibilities that Pakistani women confront, providing information for advocacy and policy initiatives that support inclusive governance and sustainable development. To empower women and build a more just and sustainable society in Pakistan, some important proposals include promoting gender-sensitive legislation, boosting mental health support services, and expanding political inclusivity.

Key words: Women Empowerment, Mental Health, Political sustainability and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The process of giving women more authority over resources, more decision-making power, and greater participation in social, political, and economic spheres is known as women empowerment (Rodriguez,2022). It involves a number of things, such as defying social norms and stereotypes, access to healthcare, education, economic possibilities, and political engagement (Tiwari & Malati, 2023). Women who are empowered tend to exhibit higher levels of agency, self-assurance, and growth prospects on both a personal and professional level (Mahato et al., 2023)

In Pakistan, the idea of women's empowerment is complex and dynamic, shaped by social, political, economic, and cultural variables (Ishfaq et al., 2023). The legal and policy framework, education, economic empowerment, healthcare, reproductive rights, and social and cultural norms were some important factors in Pakistani women's empowerment (Iraqi & Faisal,2019). Pakistani women encounter a number of obstacles in their quest for empowerment. These obstacles are frequently caused by structural injustices, cultural norms, economic factors, and societal conventions (Khan et al., 2023)

Men are positioned in positions of authority and influence in Pakistan's patriarchal society, frequently at the expense of women's rights and prospects. Pervasive gender norms and stereotypes restrict women's autonomy and decision-making skills while maintaining unequal power dynamics (Jamal et al., 2023).

Economic disadvantages, such as restricted work options, uneven compensation, and lack of control over financial resources, are commonplace for women in Pakistan. Reliance on male family members for financial support might limit women's autonomy and capacity for self-determination (Ahmed, 2024).

Women's empowerment is still severely hampered by gender-based violence, which includes honor killings, harassment, and domestic abuse. Women's movement, engagement in public life, and access to justice and support services can all be impeded by their fear of violence (Moroojo, et al., 2023).

Even while the number of women in politics has increased, many of them still encounter obstacles to full political engagement. Obstacles include a lack of support from political parties, intimidation, and prejudice in political settings can make it difficult for women to participate successfully in decision-making (Awan, 2023).

Religious and cultural customs and beliefs can sometimes be obstacles to women's empowerment. These could include expectations about duties and obligations within the family and society, dress norms, and limitations on women's movement (Awan, 2023).

Reproductive health services are among the many high-quality healthcare services that women in poor and rural areas frequently have restricted access to. Obstacles that affect women's health and general well-being include a lack of healthcare facilities, cultural taboos, and the stigma associated with seeking medical attention (Hussain et al., 2023).

It will take extensive work across many fronts to overcome these obstacles, including legislative changes, educational campaigns, economic empowerment projects, public awareness campaigns, and community-based interventions. Pakistan cannot advance unless an environment is created that is supportive of women's empowerment, opposes discriminatory conventions, and encourages gender equality (Iraqi, & Faisal,2019).

The social, cultural, religious, spiritual, historical, and holistic facets of human existence all have a significant role in mental health (Choudhry et al., 2019). Research from Pakistan suggests that gender is a risk factor for mental health issues (women are more likely to develop these conditions) (Bhatti et al.,2021).

Women's mental health in Pakistan is greatly impacted by cultural customs and society attitudes and conventions. Major problems and pressures include the degrading views toward women, and religious and ethnic tensions. Such actions have severely marginalized women in Pakistan in many areas of life, which has had a detrimental psychological effect (Noorullah et al.,2024)

In Pakistan, mental health difficulties and women's empowerment are two important topics that are strongly related. Due to cultural norms, gender inequity, and a patriarchal society, women in Pakistan confront numerous obstacles that might negatively impact their mental health. women are more likely to experience mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and psychosomatic symptoms (Ishfaq & Mushtaq,2024).

Every society's ideal aim and national objectives depend significantly on mental health at every stage of life. In this context, shifting societal perceptions is one way to help women's mental health and lessen mental health issues (Khan et al.,2015). It's also a crucial step toward women's empowerment, which is a social and multifaceted phenomenon influenced by things like women's rights, education, financial and social participation, security, absence of discrimination, equal opportunities, roles and lifestyles, and their physical, emotional, and mental health (Khan et al.,2015).

In conclusion, a multifaceted strategy involving collaboration between the public and corporate sectors, civil society, and communities is needed to empower women in Pakistan and enhance their mental health (Alvi et al., 2023). We can build a more just and equal society where women may prosper by supporting media and technology, legal reforms, economic empowerment, mental health awareness, and education (Jamal et al., 2023).

In conclusion, the most recent studies on women's empowerment in Pakistan highlight the intricacy of the challenges and opportunities that women must face in order to become empowered. Through in-depth analysis and empirical data, this research has illuminated the complex linkages between socio-cultural, political, and economic factors impacting women's empowerment in the country. However, despite these legislative developments, issues persist with access to healthcare, political participation, the economy, and education. Gender disparities in education, restricted opportunities for economic empowerment, and cultural hurdles continue to inhibit women's full participation and agency. A thorough investigation that addresses structural inequities, challenges harmful gender stereotypes, and promotes inclusive legislation and practices is necessary if women are to be empowered in the future. In order to achieve this aim, major aspect that is required to support women's empowerment when used appropriately has been included in the design of this study.

 This study aims to investigate Pakistani women's subjective experiences with mental health issues, political environments, and empowerment. It promotes a careful analysis of their viewpoints, challenges, coping mechanisms, and objectives within this complex web of relationships.

Research Questions
In order to achieve study goals, the following research questions are investigated in this study
1. What specific action does women empowerment entail? What exercises, customs, and ceremonies are a component of their being empowered?
2. How crucial is women's empowerment to their political sustainability and mental well-being? (For instance, how does empowerment impact their sense of self, their level of wellbeing, their sense of fulfillment in life, etc.)
3. How do Pakistani women face and navigate the intersection between women's empowerment, mental health concerns, and political sustainability, based on their perspectives and lived experiences?

METHOD
Qualitative research design
The present inquiry tries to address the provisional and intrusive nature of the chosen method, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). In both the interviewing and data processing stages, IPA used twofold hermeneutics, or questioning and empathic hermeneutics (Smith & Osborn, 2007). IPA denotes a thorough, two-fold richer investigation where the researcher asks the subject about items, they might not be aware of while concentrating on their lived experience (Charmaz, 2008).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
The subjective experiences of the participant's women empowerment are analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA, Smith & Osborn, 2007) The general linear pattern was employed by IPA to analyze the lived experiences of the participants. Cross-checking was done for the thorough inquiry by contrasting each participant's audio recording with their corresponding transcription (Polit & Beck, 2008). In IPA, a methodical, step-by-step procedure was employed. Similar to the previous phase, preliminary observations of the transcripts were quickly recorded upon the completion of the comprehensive reading of the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Secondly, emerging themes identified and appropriate code related to the

research question was specified separately to significant declarations in the transcripts. Additionally, similar meaning code was grouped together. Sub-themes were then developed in relation to the research question, under each code that was based on the significant statement that reflects something important (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the current study, IPA provides an opportunity to understand the participants' views about women empowerment and mental health by emphasizing their own experiences. This kind of rigorous exploration has been lacking in the empirical literature (Hodge, 2007). First, a structural analysis of the code was carried out, focusing on its content and complexity.

Data collection method
The phenomenological study (Smith, 2004) used open-ended semi-structured individual interviews, which are a commonly used qualitative data collection method (Lopez & Willis, 2004). The interviews lasted 50 to 60 minutes, depending on the 8 participants' subjective experiences.

Sample
Purposive sampling with homogeneity has been applied (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Because the samples appear to have homogeneous properties, deliberate sampling was done. An explanation of the study aims and a consent form were read aloud in the national language, Urdu, and their assent was obtained. A total of eight willing participants (women) were chosen by the search.

Inclusion criteria.
Muslim participants who resided in Pakistan, were well-versed on women's empowerment, mental health, political sustainability, and their related links, enthusiastic in their comments (Laverty, 2003), and had at least a master's degree (16 years of education) been selected for this study. The age range was 25-45. Both married and single ladies were included.

Exclusion criteria.
Participants with any specific political allegiance, inflexible political convictions, or outmoded political cultures were excluded. Interpretative Phenomenological investigations should use a modest sample size (6-10 participants; Smith, 2004). For this study, eight participants (n=8) were recruited. Table 1 shows the demographics of individuals who were assigned pseudonyms.

Procedure and setting
Using rapport-building as a quality assurance technique, a relationship was built with research participants in order to guarantee the validity of the current investigation. Participants in this study were given the freedom and encouragement to talk about their own experiences. All the details about the goal, rationale, estimated time frame, and potential follow-up interview were communicated to the participants. Participants had the option to ask questions, and an interview guide (which included both an oral and visual guide with interview questions and researcher assistance) was given to ensure the quality of the data collection.
An open-ended question about the participant's background and age was asked at the beginning of each interview to set the tone for the conversational questions that followed. Throughout the process, interview prompts were used to encourage the participant to reflect on their feelings and share their lived experiences. Appropriate attention was given to significant non-verbal cues beyond the participant's verbatim tape recordings as a way to enhance the participants' understanding and expression. Giving participant input regarding the interview brought the interview to a close. The participant replies were recorded using a digital recorder, and the interviews took between forty and eighty minutes. Several procedures were used to find important and pertinent superordinate, subordinate, and recurrent themes once the data had been transcribed. Peer review (Lee et al.,2013), the identification of personal bias, and methodological soundness all supported the analyses.

Ethical considerations
The Govt College Women University Faisalabad, Pakistan's institutional postgraduate research committee reviewed and approved this study proposal. Semi-structured interviews were performed with participants either with informed consent obtained from individuals or with permission from their respective relevant organizations. The research's objectives were explained to them, and confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed in accordance with APA ethical guidelines. Data was recorded and interviews were done following written informed permission.

Table 1: *Demographic of Participant: (N=8)*

Sr. no	Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Education	Occupation
1	Hania	Female	35	Unmarried	MBSS	Doctor
2	Zahida	Female	29	Married	M.Phill in Political Science	Lecturer
3	Maryaum	Female	26	Unmarried	PhD in Psychology	Clinical Psychologist
4	Nooreen	Female	37	Unmarried	M.Phill in Psychology	Health Psychologist
5	Hadia	Female	43	Married	Master in Islamic-study	Teacher
6	Ume-Kalsoom	Female	31	Married	MBA	Banker
7	Naseem Bibi	Female	28	Married	Master in Urdu	Housewife
8	Sadia Ali	Female	37	Married	Master in International Relation	Lecturer

Note. In order to protect participant anonymity, the real names are not added.

Table 2: *Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of women empowerment, mental health, and political sustainability (N=8)*

Super Ordinate Theme	Sub Ordinate Subtheme	Emergent Themes	Verbal Account
Women Empowerment	Empowerment Struggles		
		Societal Expectations	"I constantly feel pressured to conform to society's expectations of how a woman should behave and what roles I should fulfill, which hinders my empowerment."
		Family Dynamics	"Within my family, there's a struggle for power and decision-making, making it challenging for me to assert my own empowerment."
	Empowerment Factors		
		Primary Welfare	*"For me, the primary welfare as a woman is having control over my own body and reproductive choices. Growing up, I witnessed how lack of access to reproductive healthcare and education affected the women in my community."*
		Developmental Welfare	*"To me, development welfare as a woman means having equal access to education, opportunities, and resources to pursue my aspirations and contribute to my community's growth."*
	Empowerment Strategies	Education	"Education has been my pathway to empowerment, giving me knowledge and skills to navigate challenges and make informed decisions."
		Advocacy	"I engage in advocacy to promote women's rights and political sustainability, believing that change starts with raising our voices."
Empowerment Types	Personal Empowerment	Self-Reflection	"Engaging in self-reflection and introspection has empowered me to challenge limiting beliefs and societal norms, fostering personal growth and resilience."
		Skill Development	"Developing skills like assertiveness and negotiation has been instrumental in navigating challenges and advocating for my rights in various spheres of life."
	Economic Empowerment	Entrepreneurship	"Starting my own business has given me financial independence and a platform to empower other women by providing employment opportunities."
		Financial Literacy	"Promoting financial literacy among women has been a key strategy in empowering them to make informed decisions about their finances and future."
	Cultural Empowerment	Identity Expression	"Embracing my cultural identity and heritage has empowered me to challenge stereotypes and advocate for inclusivity and diversity in all aspects of life."
		Cultural Activism	"Engaging in cultural activism allows me to promote positive representations of my culture and challenge discriminatory practices, contributing to social change."
Societal Influence			
	Societal Change Efforts	Grassroots Initiatives	"I'm involved in grassroots initiatives that empower women at the local level, addressing societal norms and inequalities to promote lasting change."
Political Influence			
	Political Engagement	Participation	"Being politically active allows me to contribute to shaping policies that impact women's empowerment and mental health services."
		Challenges	"However, there are challenges like discrimination and backlash for being a vocal advocate, but I'm determined to continue fighting for change."

Super Ordinate Theme	Sub Ordinate Subtheme	Emergent Themes	Verbal Account
	Political Participation	Representation	"Ensuring women's representation in political processes is crucial for addressing their unique needs and advancing policies for gender equality and mental health."
Mental Health		Policy Advocacy	"Advocating for policies that prioritize mental health services and support systems is essential for addressing the mental well-being of women in our society."
	Mental Health Challenges	Stigma	"The stigma surrounding mental health is real; I often feel judged and ostracized when I talk about my struggles or seek help."
		Access to Services	"Accessing mental health services is difficult due to financial constraints and lack of facilities, limiting my ability to manage my mental well-being."
	Mental Health Coping	Social Support	"Having a supportive network of friends and family has been crucial in coping with mental health issues, providing understanding and encouragement."
		Self-Care	"I prioritize self-care practices like mindfulness and exercise to maintain my mental well-being and resilience amidst daily stressors."
		Community Building	"Building strong communities where women can support each other is key to sustaining empowerment efforts and fostering resilience."
	Mental Health Advocacy	Awareness Campaigns	"I organize awareness campaigns to reduce stigma around mental health and encourage seeking help, promoting a culture of openness and support."
		Policy Advocacy	"Advocating for policies that prioritize mental health services and support systems is essential for addressing the mental well-being of women in our society."

Table 2 presented the super-Ordinate, Subordinate and emergent themes along with verbal account of participant in detail.

Finding and Discussion

Important aspects of social well-being include women's empowerment, mental health, and political sustainability, especially in environments like Pakistan where political instability and gender inequality are pervasive (Rodriguez, 2022). Even with advancements in mental health and women's rights, there are still major obstacles that affect people's lives as well as larger sociopolitical factors (Shah et al,2023). This study is to investigate the subjective experiences and viewpoints of women in Pakistan, looking at the relationships and influences between political sustainability, mental health concerns, and empowerment.

The results show that there are intricate relationships between mental health, political sustainability in Pakistan, and women's empowerment (Batool et al, 2021). The current study results showed that mental health of women is closely associated with their feelings of empowerment, as their sense of agency and autonomy is shaped by several circumstances like economic inequality, gender-based violence, and cultural expectations (Ishfaq & Mushtaq,2024). Mental health issues, such as trauma, depression, and anxiety, are major obstacles to women's political engagement and empowerment (Jabeen et al 2020). These issues are sometimes made worse by societal stigma and insufficient support networks. Despite these obstacles, women show resiliency and agency by taking up political lobbying, community organization, and grassroots action to solve social concerns and advance gender equality (Ahmed,2024).

The present study emphasizes the necessity of comprehensive strategies for women's empowerment that give attention to structural injustices, promote inclusive political processes, and give priority to mental health care. It draws attention to how civil society projects, grassroots movements, and legislative changes have advanced political sustainability and gender equality in Pakistan. Sustainable progress toward a more inclusive and fair society may be made by elevating the voices of women, questioning gender conventions, and raising awareness of mental health issues (Bhatti et al., 2021)

Women's empowerment encompasses a spectrum of social, economic, and political processes that enable women to realize their full potential, exercise agency, and participate actively in decision-making (Khan, 2016). In Pakistan, patriarchal norms, discriminatory laws, and cultural practices perpetuate gender disparities, limiting women's access to education, economic opportunities, and healthcare. However, grassroots movements, advocacy efforts, and policy reforms have led to incremental progress in advancing women's rights and challenging oppressive structures (Ishfaq, & Mushtaq,2024).

Moreover, Mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and trauma, are pervasive yet often overlooked challenges affecting women in Pakistan. Stigma, cultural taboos, and inadequate mental health services contribute to underreporting and untreated mental illness among women. Moreover, the intersection of gender-based violence, poverty, and social inequality

exacerbates mental health disparities, further marginalizing vulnerable populations. Recognizing the intrinsic link between gender and mental health is crucial for addressing these systemic issues and promoting holistic well-being (Alvi et al, 2023).

In addition of this, in Pakistan, democratic governance has been marred by corruption, power struggles, and lack of accountability, undermining trust in the political process (Adeleye et al ,2023). Women's political participation remains limited, with entrenched gender norms and systemic barriers hindering their representation and influence in decision-making bodies (Amin & Uddin, 2023). However, grassroots movements, civil society initiatives, and electoral reforms have sought to enhance women's political agency and promote inclusive governance

(Imran Rafiq, 2024).

In the line of same context, the intersectionality of women empowerment, mental health, and political sustainability underscores their interconnectedness and mutual reinforcement. Women's empowerment is intricately linked to mental well-being, as empowerment initiatives that fail to address mental health disparities may perpetuate inequities and exacerbate psychological distress. Similarly, political sustainability hinges on the inclusion and participation of diverse voices, including those of women with lived experiences of mental illness. By fostering inclusive governance structures and prioritizing mental health support, policymakers can promote a more resilient and equitable political landscape (Adeleye et al, 2024).

Despite progress in addressing women's rights and mental health stigma, persistent challenges remain, requiring comprehensive and multidimensional strategies for systemic change. Economic empowerment, access to quality healthcare, and legal reforms are essential for advancing women's rights and improving mental health outcomes. Additionally, investment in mental health education, community-based interventions, and psychosocial support services can enhance resilience and promote well-being among women (Ishfaq & Mushtaq, 2024).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study emphasize the interconnectedness of women's empowerment, mental health, and political sustainability in Pakistan. By acknowledging and addressing the complex dynamics shaping women's lives, policymakers, and stakeholders can implement targeted interventions to promote gender equality, mental well-being, and inclusive governance. Through collaborative efforts and a commitment to social justice, Pakistan can work towards creating a more equitable and sustainable future for all its citizens.

Implication

The implications of the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) underscore the interconnectedness of women empowerment, mental health, and political sustainability in Pakistan and highlight the importance of integrated interventions, capacity building, community engagement, research, partnerships, advocacy, and inclusive governance for driving sustainable development and social change. By addressing these intersecting challenges comprehensively and collaboratively, Pakistan can advance towards a more equitable, resilient, and inclusive society for all its citizens.

Limitation and Suggestion

One limitation of the study may be the sample size and diversity of participants. A larger and more diverse sample, including women from various regions, socio-economic backgrounds, and ethnic groups, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of women's experiences and perspectives in Pakistan.

The findings of the study may be context-specific and may not be fully generalizable to all women in Pakistan or other socio-cultural contexts. Factors such as cultural norms, regional differences, and historical contexts may influence women's experiences of empowerment, mental health, and political engagement in unique ways.

The study's findings may be influenced by the temporal context in which data were collected. Socio-political events, policy changes, or cultural shifts occurring during the study period may impact women's experiences and perceptions, affecting the relevance and applicability of the findings over time.

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