

Political Interest and Political Participation of Women: Mediating Role of Education

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between political interest, education, and political participation among educated Pakistani women, with a focus on education as a mediating factor. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 400 female students across four universities in Islamabad and Rawalpindi through a structured survey. Analysis in SPSS included descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, linear regression, and mediation testing using the Hayes PROCESS macro. Results show a significant positive relationship between political interest and political participation, and education substantially increases political interest. However, education did not significantly strengthen the link between political interest and political involvement. These findings suggest that although higher education enhances political awareness, sociocultural and structural barriers continue to restrict women's active political engagement. The study underscores the need for context-sensitive strategies that convert political knowledge into meaningful participation while addressing persistent gendered constraints in Pakistan's political landscape.

Keywords: Political interest, Political Participation, Educated Women, Urban Women, Mediation, Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Political interest plays a crucial role in political participation, whereby individuals engage with political events, institutions, and processes. It underpins civic participation and democratic vitality by promoting activities such as voting, candidacy, and lobbying (Berinsky, 2006; Smets & Van Ham, 2013). More than a transient or situational sentiment, political interest constitutes a long-term mindset that influences patterns of political involvement (Luskin, 1990; Robinson, 2017). The resource model of political participation underscores the importance of political interest, often treating it as a more potent predictor of political activity than socioeconomic status (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman, 1995). Women's participation is a crucial aspect of political involvement and a key topic in discussions on human rights, gender equality, and inclusive development. Women's political involvement is also essential for the legitimacy of democratic institutions and ensuring that policy decisions address the diverse needs of society. When women hold political leadership positions, social

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issues tend to be more responsive to concerns such as healthcare, education, and welfare policies (Susan, 2013). Additionally, women's political participation promotes greater democracy, reduces inequalities, and fosters collaboration across social and political lines (World Economic Forum, 2017). It also acts as a multiplier by increasing women's voter turnout and enhancing the quality and inclusiveness of governance (Nancy, Schlozman, and Sidney, 2001).

Despite these dynamics, global trends show that women remain underrepresented in political institutions. Even though other countries have seen increases in women's political participation, as demonstrated in the United States and the United Kingdom (Currell, 2005; Burns, 2007; Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2010), women's representation worldwide is still low. Current statistics indicate that women occupy 15.2 percent of parliamentary seats worldwide. In developed democracies, progress has been uneven; for instance, in 2002, only six of fifty U.S. governors were women (Paxton, Kunovich, & Hughes, 2007). These disparities suggest that verbal commitments to gender equality, such as those outlined in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (2019), have not yet led to substantial equality in political leadership roles (Morobane, 2014; Chalaby, 2017).

The political participation of women in South Asia, especially in Pakistan, is influenced by cultural, structural, and institutional factors. Although more educated women are demonstrating increased interest in politics, this does not always lead to active involvement. The prevailing gender norms and the view of politics as a male domain, along with economic dependency and domestic responsibilities, continue to restrict women's political agency (Kayser, 2013). These limitations highlight the need to analyze not only the levels of political interest but also how that interest can evolve into participation, particularly within patriarchal and conservative socio-political environments. In this context, education emerges as a crucial mediating factor. It is inherently transformative, equipping individuals with cognitive and analytical skills to make informed decisions in the political sphere (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Hillygus, 2005). For women in Pakistan, education serves as an empowering force, helping challenge rigid gender norms and fostering a stronger sense of civic consciousness and agency. However, the relationship between political interest, education, and political participation has not been sufficiently theorized or empirically studied in societies where gender inequality is deeply embedded.

This paper addresses this gap by examining the link between political interest and political participation among educated women in Pakistan, and how education mediates this relationship. The study aims to explore the role of education in fostering political awareness and capacity, enabling women to overcome societal barriers and turn political interest into meaningful participation, focusing on educated women as respondents. In doing so, the research will contribute to the broader academic discussions on gender, education, and political participation, offering context-specific insights into the challenges and opportunities for increasing women's political empowerment in Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature has established a strong link between political interest and political participation, as political interest is seen as a precondition for civic and electoral involvement. According to Almond and Verba (2015), focusing on political issues and being involved in political processes are the most important aspects of political interest. Consistent with Armingeon (2014), Quintelier & Van Deth (2014), and Galston (2004), it was shown that higher political interest significantly increases the likelihood of voting, campaigning, and engaging in political activism. All these studies demonstrate that political interest is a fundamental factor shaping political behavior. A substantial body of literature highlights education as a key factor in political participation. Scholars such as Claes and Hooghe (2017), Sondheimer and Green (2010), and Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001) have demonstrated how education enhances cognitive abilities, political awareness, and civic skills, thereby enabling engagement.

Education influences participation both directly—by improving knowledge and political efficacy—and indirectly—by increasing opportunities for civic engagement through student or community groups. However, the strength of this relationship varies across countries. For example, Pelkonen (2012) and Siedler (2010) found that educational reforms reduced the impact of political participation in Norway and Germany. In contrast, studies from the U.S. and U.K. report stronger associations, likely due to the overlap between education and socioeconomic advantages (Milligan, Moretti, and Oreopoulos, 2004).

Despite these insights, much of the existing literature focuses on general populations or Western contexts, with relatively less attention to how education interacts with gender and cultural norms in patriarchal societies.

Gendered analyses of political participation often identify structural, cultural, and psychological barriers that disproportionately hinder women's engagement in political life (Kunovich & Paxton, 2005; Fleschenberg & Bari, 2015). In conservative societies such as Pakistan, these barriers are particularly acute. Studies by Naz (2011), Naz and Ahmad (2012), and Agbalajobi (2010) document the pervasive influence of patriarchal norms, gender discrimination, and limited access to education, all of which constrain women's political agency. Even women with higher education often face social resistance or internalized norms that discourage political involvement (UNDP, 2005; Nazir et al., 2019; Prihatini, 2020).

While some recent scholarship in Pakistan (e.g., Khan et al., 2021) has begun to explore the role of education in enhancing rural women's political knowledge and participation, these studies do not systematically investigate how education mediates the relationship between political interest and political participation, particularly among urban women, a group increasingly exposed to both educational opportunities and sociocultural constraints. This study builds upon and extends previous research in several important ways: Unlike many cross-national or Western-centric studies, this research focuses specifically on Pakistan. In this country, cultural conservatism and patriarchal norms significantly shape gendered patterns of political behavior. While previous studies have explored the individual effects of political interest or education on political participation, this study uniquely examines education as a mediating variable, a mechanism through which political interest translates

into actual political engagement. This study centers on young urban women, a demographic that occupies a transitional space between traditional norms and modern influences. By examining how education affects their political interest and behavior, the study adds a critical gender dimension to the literature on political participation in developing societies. By grounding the analysis in the Relative Education Model and Social Capital Theory, this study presents a nuanced theoretical framework to explain how education provides not only knowledge but also social resources and positional advantages that facilitate political engagement among marginalized groups.

This research addresses a clear empirical and theoretical gap in the literature, investigating how education mediates the relationship between political interest and participation among women in a highly patriarchal context. By focusing on urban Pakistan and applying a robust theoretical lens, the study provides new insights into the conditions under which education can become a transformative force for women's political empowerment. It aims to inform both academic understanding and policy interventions targeted at improving women's civic and political inclusion through education.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Relative Education Model, which conceptualizes education as a positional good. Its value lies not merely in its possession but in how it differentiates individuals from one another within a social hierarchy. Within this model, education becomes a critical determinant of access to resources, status, and opportunities, particularly in stratified societies. Social capital theory, developed by Granovetter (1973) and Lin (1999), complements this perspective by emphasizing the role of social networks in accessing such resources. Social capital refers to the benefits individuals gain from their social ties and networks, which can be instrumental in achieving personal and collective goals. Education, as a foundational social institution, not only determines occupational or economic outcomes but also plays a central role in the formation and expansion of social networks. Through these networks, individuals acquire civic skills, political awareness, and normative values that shape their engagement with political processes. Scholars such as Dee (2004) and Hadjar and Becker (2006) argue that education also transmits democratic, pluralistic, and participatory values, which foster political interest and engagement.

Political interest, defined as the cognitive and emotional engagement with political affairs, is widely recognized as a precursor to political participation. However, the transition from interest to participation is not automatic. It is mediated by a range of factors, including cultural norms, gender roles, age, and educational attainment. Within the framework of the Relative Education Model, education is viewed as enhancing political knowledge, critical thinking, and civic competence, thereby equipping individuals with the tools necessary to act upon their political interests (Shahdeed, 2017; Sharif & Hina, 2018). A substantial body of research has confirmed the positive relationship between educational attainment and political engagement, with education functioning as a key agent of political socialization (Siddiqui, 2015; Radu, 2018; Wang et al., 2019). Despite progress in some areas, gender disparities in political engagement remain significant across both developed and developing contexts. In Western societies, women are less likely than men to join political parties, attend

demonstrations, or express political interest (Oxaal & Baden, 1997; Berinsky & Lenz, 2011; Robinson & Gottlieb, 2019). These disparities are further exacerbated in many developing countries, including Pakistan, where patriarchal structures, rigid gender norms, and cultural conservatism continue to marginalize women from political spheres (Naz, 2011; Naz & Ahmad, 2012; Agbalajobi, 2010). In such settings, women's political disempowerment is not only institutional but also deeply embedded in the sociocultural fabric, where their participation is often restricted, and their political agency is limited (UNDP, 2005; Nazir et al., 2019; Prihatini, 2020).

In the Pakistani context, this study posits that education may serve as a mediating force, especially for young urban women, by fostering political awareness and challenging traditional gender norms. The Relative Education Model offers a compelling lens for examining how women's educational attainment can translate political interest into active political participation. By equipping women with critical knowledge and access to broader social networks, education enhances their capacity to navigate and resist the sociocultural constraints that typically hinder their civic engagement. Thus, this framework underscores the intricate interplay between education, social capital, and cultural norms in shaping women's political behavior. It highlights the potential of education to act as a catalyst for political empowerment, especially in patriarchal societies where systemic barriers continue to limit women's roles in democratic processes.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

The study investigates the relationship between **political interest** (independent variable) and **political participation** (dependent variable), with **education** as a mediating variable. Political interest, defined as the degree to which individuals engage with and are concerned about political affairs, is theorized to influence political participation. It encompasses a range of activities through which citizens express their political preferences and exert influence over the political decision-making process. However, the direct relationship between these variables may not be sufficient to explain variations in political participation, necessitating the inclusion of education as a critical mediating factor. Education is hypothesized to enhance individuals' cognitive and social capacities, thereby influencing their political interests and participation. It provides individuals with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to comprehend political processes, participate in political discourse, and take informed action. Education bridges the gap between mere awareness and active involvement by mediating the relationship between political interest and participation, highlighting its pivotal role in shaping political behavior. This framework highlights the interconnections among political interests, education, and political participation, offering a nuanced understanding of how these variables interact to shape democratic engagement.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a cross-sectional design to examine the relationship between political interest and political participation, and the mediating role of education, among female university students. The research was conducted in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, two urban centers in Pakistan renowned for their diverse academic environments and dense concentration of higher education institutions. Four universities were purposively selected for their academic

diversity and student populations: These institutions provided a representative setting for exploring the political behaviors and attitudes of young, educated women. The study population consisted of female students enrolled in BS, MS, and PhD programs across the selected universities. This demographic was chosen for its relevance to the research focus, given their advanced educational exposure and potential influence on political discourse and civic culture in Pakistan. From an estimated population of 20,000 female students across the four institutions, a sample of 400 respondents was selected using simple random sampling. This approach ensured that each participant had an equal chance of being selected, thereby minimizing sampling bias and enhancing the generalizability of the findings. An equal distribution of 100 participants per university was maintained to allow for balanced institutional representation.

Quantitative data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire developed in English, reflecting the medium of instruction across the selected institutions. Before distribution, necessary permissions were obtained from university authorities, and the data collection process was facilitated during regular class hours with the cooperation of academic staff. The researchers personally administered and retrieved the questionnaires, ensuring clear instructions and complete responses. This study was reviewed and approved by the Board of the Faculty of the International Islamic University, Islamabad. Ethical approval was granted under the reference number [No.IIU.BOF/2023]. All participants provided informed consent prior to their inclusion in the study, and all procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the relevant institution. Informed consent was obtained from all individuals who participated in the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, their right to confidentiality, and their freedom to withdraw at any stage without any consequences. Verbal consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection to ensure their voluntary and informed participation, in accordance with ethical research standards.

Control Variables

This study incorporates three control variables to ensure a more precise analysis of the relationship between independent and dependent variables. These control variables are:

Higher Level of Education: By controlling education, the study focuses specifically on university students, thereby minimizing the potential confounding effects of varying educational levels among respondents.

Urban Residence: Including urban residence as a control variable acknowledges the potential influence of socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental factors unique to urban settings. As all respondents reside in the metropolitan areas of Islamabad and Rawalpindi, this control ensures that the findings reflect urban-specific dynamics without interference from rural-urban disparities.

Gender: As a categorical variable, gender is controlled by including only female respondents in the study. This approach eliminates the potential confounding effects of gender-related differences, ensuring that the observed relationships reflect women's experiences in political

interest and participation. Incorporating these control variables enhances the study's internal validity, providing a more rigorous and focused investigation of the mediated relationship between political interest and political participation.

Political Participation as the Dependent Variable

In this study, political participation is conceptualized as the dependent variable. The following definition by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1999) has been adopted to guide the analysis: "Political participation encompasses a spectrum of activities through which individuals engage in the democratic process and contribute to shaping the governance of their society. It involves registering to vote, casting ballots in elections, affiliating with political parties, actively participating in political campaigns, joining demonstrations or protests, making financial contributions to political candidates, and supporting civic initiatives, such as circulating petitions. Essentially, political participation reflects the extent to which individuals involve themselves in the various facets of the political landscape, exerting their influence and contributing to the functioning of a democratic society." This definition is the foundation for exploring political engagement in alignment with the study's objectives. To operationalize the concept, researchers have employed a scale using eight specific indicators of political participation:

1. Have you registered to vote?
2. Did you cast your vote in the 2024 election?
3. Did you cast a vote for the political party of your choice?
4. Are you a member of a political party?
5. Have you participated in a political campaign?
6. Have you ever organized or participated in a demonstration or protest?
7. Have you ever donated money to a political candidate?
8. Have you ever circulated a petition?

The researchers ensured the internal consistency and reliability of the political participation scale by using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951). The scale, comprising eight items, achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.752, indicating acceptable reliability. This robust methodological approach enables a comprehensive and reliable assessment of political participation, thereby facilitating an in-depth understanding of the political engagement patterns among the study's respondents.

Political Interest as the Independent Variable

In this study, political interest is conceptualized as the independent variable. Drawing on Almond and Verba's (2015) theoretical framework, political interest is defined through a dual philosophical approach, encompassing general interest in political affairs and active engagement in significant political activities, such as campaigns and protests. This definition aligns with the study's objectives, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of political interest among educated women.

The study operationalizes political interest using five specific indicators:

- V1. General interest in politics and governmental activities.
- V2 Interest in election campaigns.

V3. Interest in demonstrations.

V4. Interest in political parties and their performance.

V5. Engagement in discussions about political issues with friends or family.

Political Interest Scale

A customized scale was developed to measure the political interest of educated women, incorporating five normative statements that reflect the indicators mentioned earlier. Each item was measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (5), allowing respondents to express varying degrees of agreement or disagreement. This design ensures a nuanced assessment of political interest by capturing variations in intensity across respondents' perceptions and attitudes. The scale's reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a value of 0.804, indicating high internal consistency.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Table 1: Education of respondents (N=400)

Education	Frequency	Percentage
BS	365	91.3
MS	35	8.8
Total	400	100

Education is a critical mediator in influencing individual behaviors, perceptions, and participation in societal or professional domains. All respondents in the study are highly educated, as indicated in Table 1. Education is a crucial variable that helps individuals bridge the gap between political interest and active participation, making it a cornerstone for understanding this relationship.

Descriptive Analysis of Political Interest

Table 2: Frequency Distribution of Women Regarding Political Interest (N=400)

Statements	SA f (%)	A f (%)	D f (%)	SD f (%)	Mean	Sd	Mode
I have a general interest in Governmental activities	77 (19.3)	153 (38.3)	136 (34.0)	34 (8.5)	2.68	0.88	3.00
I am interested in election Campaigns	57 (14.3)	136 (34.0)	153 (38.3)	54 (13.5)	2.49	0.89	2.00
I am interested in demonstrations	67 (16.8)	197 (49.3)	91 (22.8)	45 (11.3)	2.72	0.87	3.00
I am interested in political parties and their performance	65 (16.3)	172 (43.0)	107 (26.8)	56 (14.0)	2.62	0.91	3.00
I have a general interest in political discussions	86 (21.5)	176 (44.0)	86 (21.0)	52 (13.0)	2.74	0.94	3.00

Figure 1: Descriptive Statistics of Political Interest of Women

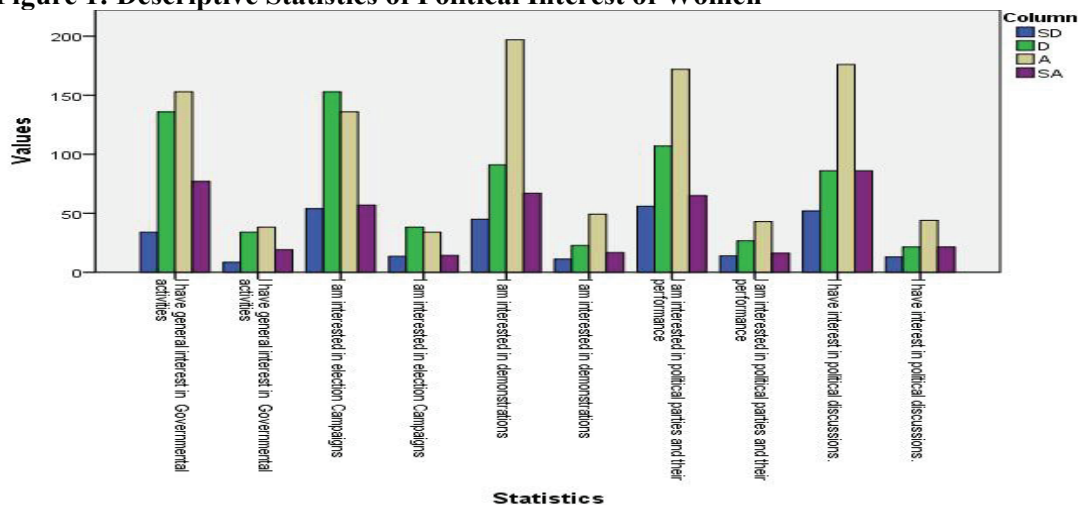
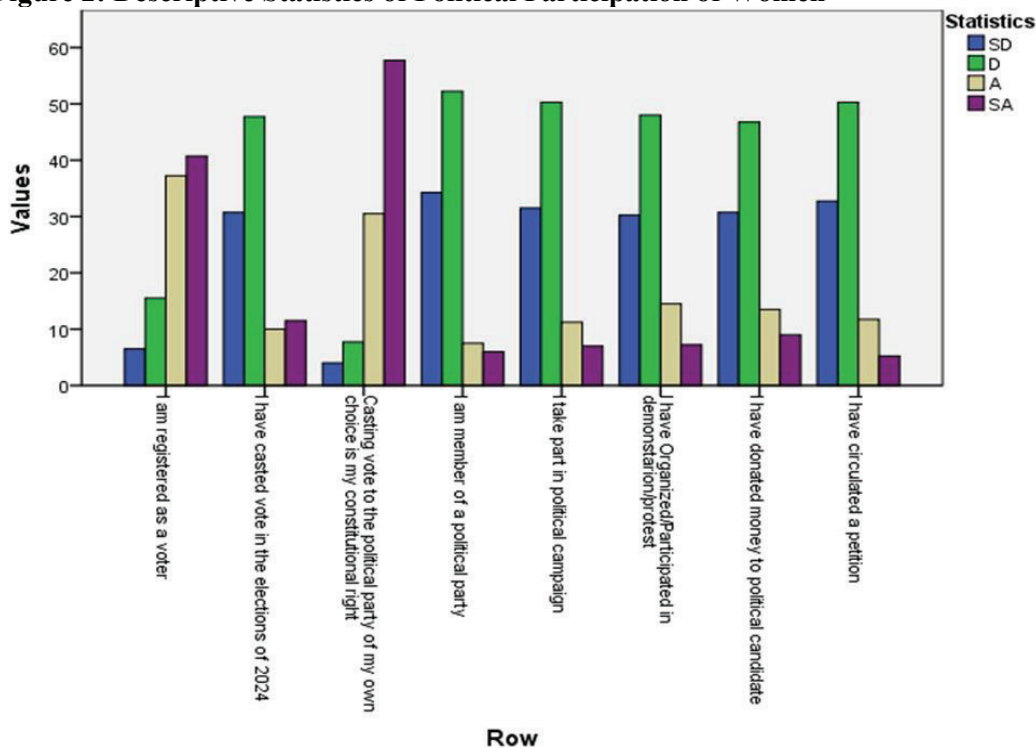


Figure 2: Descriptive Statistics of Political Participation of Women



Association between Political Interest and Political Participation of Women

Table 3: Correlation matrix showing the relationship between two variables: "political interest" and "political participation"

Variable	1	2
Political Interest		
Political Participation	.50**	

Note. $N = 400$. $p < .01$ (2-tailed).

Table 4: Linear Regression Model Predicting Political Participation from Political Interest Measures

Predictor	Estimate (B)	SE	T	p
Intercept	1.28	0.09	14.05	< .001
General Interest in Government Activities	0.08	0.03	2.33	.021
Interest in Election Campaigns	0.10	0.03	3.37	.001
Interest in Demonstrations	-0.01	0.03	-0.27	.790
Interest in Political Parties and Their Performance	0.10	0.03	3.25	.001
Interest in Political Discussions	0.11	0.03	3.99	< .001

Note. Dependent variable = Political Participation. $N = 400$. Significance values are two-tailed.

The correlation matrix reveals a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.499$, $p < 0.01$) between political interest and participation in politics. As individuals' political interest increases, their political participation tends to increase as well. The correlation coefficient of 0.499 indicates a moderate positive relationship between the two variables.

The ANOVA table provides information on the variance in the dependent variable explained by the regression model, the overall significance of the model, and the significance of each predictor variable. Additionally, the Model Coefficients table provides information about the estimated coefficients (slopes) of each predictor variable, along with their standard errors, t-values, and p-values. The Regression model has a sum of squares of 28.111 and 5 degrees of freedom, indicating that the model explains a significant amount of the variance in political participation. The Mean Square is 5.622, representing the average variance amount defined by each predictor. The F-value of 28.180 is significant at $p < .001$, indicating that the regression model predicts political participation. The Total sum of squares is 106.719, indicating the total variance in political participation. The ANOVA table indicates that the regression model is a significant predictor of political participation ($F(5,394) = 28.180$, $p < .001$). The predictors in the model explain a considerable amount of the variability in Political Participation. The model explains 26.3% of the variance in Political Participation (R -squared = .263), suggesting that it is moderately effective in explaining political participation. The R -value of 0.513 indicates a moderate positive linear relationship between political interest and political participation.

The coefficients table indicates that all predictor variables except interest in the demonstration are significant predictors of political participation. Specifically, one unit increase in General Interest in Government Activities, Interest in Election Campaigns,

Interest in Political Parties and their Performance, and Interest in Political Discussions is associated with increases in Political Participation by .077, .104, .100, and .110, respectively. These coefficients are all significant at $p < .05$, except for Interest in Demonstration, which is not a significant predictor of Political Participation.

Table 6: Mediation Estimates

Mediation Estimates						
Effect	Estimate	SE	Z	P	% Mediation	
Indirect	4.43e-4	0.00452	0.0981	0.922	0.116	
Direct	0.381	0.03345	11.3955	< .001	99.884	
Total	0.382	0.03315	11.5140	< .001	100.000	
Path Estimates						
			Estimate	SE	Z	p
Political Interest	→	Education	0.05649	0.0207	2.7248	0.006
Education	→	MPP	0.00785	0.0799	0.0982	0.922
Political Participation	→	MPP	0.38121	0.0335	11.3955	< .001

MPP (Mean Political Participation)

The path estimate for the effect of **political interest (Education)** on **education (political interest)** is significant (Estimate = **0.05649**, SE = 0.0207, Z = 2.7248, $p = 0.006$). This finding indicates that women with higher levels of education tend to develop a more substantial interest in politics. Education enhances awareness of political rights and the importance of participation in political processes, such as voting. The indirect effect of education on political participation through political interest is minimal and not statistically significant (Indirect Effect = 0.000443, SE = 0.00452, Z = 0.0981, $p = 0.922$).

The findings suggest that while education increases political interest, this interest does not necessarily translate into a significant increase in active political participation beyond basic activities, such as voting. Education has a positive influence on women's political interest, as evidenced by the considerable path estimate (0.05649, $p = 0.006$). Women with higher levels of education are more aware of political issues and their rights, leading to increased interest in politics.

The analysis examines the relationship between political interest and participation, considering education as a mediating factor. Urban residence and gender are control variables, as the study focuses on highly educated women from urban areas. The Pearson correlation coefficient between political interest and political participation is 0.499, with a significance level of $p < 0.001$. This moderate and significant positive correlation suggests that women with greater political interest are more likely to engage in political participation. The overall model fit indicates that the independent variables explain a significant portion of the variance in political participation ($R^2 = 0.263$, $F = 28.2$, $p < 0.001$).

Interest in Political Discussions: Estimate = **0.110**, $p < 0.001$ (strongest predictor).

Interest in Election Campaigns: Estimate = **0.104**, $p = 0.001$.

Interest in Political Parties and Their Performance: Estimate = **0.100**, $p = 0.001$.

General Interest in Government Activities: Estimate = 0.077, $p = 0.021$.

These findings suggest that specific dimensions of political interest, particularly discussions and active interest in campaigns and parties, drive political participation.

Interest in Demonstration: This predictor is not significant (Estimate = -0.009, $p = 0.790$), indicating that this dimension of political interest does not directly influence participation.

The mediation analysis evaluates how education influences the relationship between political interest and political participation: The direct effect of political interest on political participation is significant (Estimate = 0.381, $p < 0.001$). The total effect of political interest on political participation (direct + indirect) is 0.382 ($p < 0.001$), confirming a robust overall relationship. The indirect effect of political interest on political participation via education is minimal and statistically insignificant (Estimate = 0.000443, $p = 0.922$). Education may slightly enhance political participation, but its mediating role is negligible.

Political Interest → Education: The path is significant (Estimate = 0.05649, $p = 0.006$).

Women with a greater interest in politics tend to seek or benefit from education, which broadens their understanding of the subject.

Education → Political Participation: The path is insignificant (Estimate = 0.00785, $p = 0.922$).

This finding suggests that education does not significantly mediate the translation of political interest into political participation. The study was conducted among highly educated urban women. Urban residence likely contributes to better access to education and resources, enabling women to be politically aware and participatory. The selection of highly educated women emphasizes the role of education in shaping political interest and participation. Still, structural factors (such as gender roles or urban-rural disparities) are minimized.

The findings provide empirical support for the positive relationship between political interest and participation, aligning with the literature that emphasizes the centrality of political interest in fostering engagement. Almond and Verba (2015) and Galston (2004) argue that political interest is the foundation of political behavior, corroborated by the current study's evidence that educated women with a greater interest in political discussions, campaigns, and parties actively participate in politics. Recent scholarly work depicts that female voter turnout and participation in public life encourage responsiveness to women's needs at all levels of government, municipal, provincial, and national (Lutz, 2022). However, the barriers to women's political participation remain significant, particularly in developing countries (Dar & Shairgojri, 2022).

The theoretical foundations of this study highlight the importance of social capital and social networking for individuals' political empowerment and participation in the country's political affairs. However, in the context of Pakistan, one of the key barriers to women's political participation is entrenched patriarchy, which influences societal norms and expectations regarding gender roles. In many traditional societies, including parts of Pakistan (Malik &

Khan, 2022), politics is perceived as a male-dominated sphere, making it difficult for women to assert their presence. Cultural expectations that prioritize women's domestic roles over public involvement discourage their participation in electoral processes. According to a study conducted by Rai (2018), cultural traditions rooted in power structures and gender hierarchies create substantial barriers to women's political participation. However, Rahman and Asad (2024) reported that women are confined to domestic roles, limiting their political agency. Hierarchical gender roles limit women's involvement in collectivist countries like Pakistan, where women, even with higher education, are expected to prioritize family responsibilities, restricting their time and resources for political activities. Cultural perceptions of politics (Karim & Iqbal, 2023) considered it a male-dominated domain, discouraging women from seeking leadership positions. Women face social backlash for challenging traditional roles, with the media often portraying female politicians negatively. Societal norms reinforce male-dominated political networks, excluding women from gaining opportunities for social capital and networking in politics as an institution.

Education is considered a key indicator of progress and development, but cultural and structural barriers continue to hinder women's political engagement. Patriarchal norms, religious conservatism, and gender-based violence restrict women's ability to participate in electoral politics (Ilyas, 2021; Ikram & Raza, 2022). The perception of women as custodians of family honor remains deeply embedded, making any form of public participation, particularly in politics, a challenging endeavor (Khan, 2020). The case of Pakistan is exceptional in that the intersection of culture, religion, and politics has created a complex environment for highly educated women seeking to participate in politics. Many female politicians and activists have reported facing significant societal resistance and view their political engagement as a challenge to traditional norms (Anwar, 2021). Women's self-censorship due to these societal pressures has limited their engagement, with many opting for indirect forms of activism rather than direct political involvement (Farooq, 2021). This resistance to women's political participation is not unique to Pakistan but resonates with similar struggles faced by women in patriarchal societies worldwide (Yusuf & Faiz, 2022).

Despite its limited mediating effect, education plays a significant role in shaping political interest. As Sondheimer and Green (2010) highlight, education fosters analytical thinking and political knowledge, contributing to greater interest in political affairs, as evidenced by the significant path from education to political interest. While Sondheimer and Green's (2010) framework underscores the transformative role of education in addressing barriers to women's political participation, the current study challenges its universality, showing that, in specific contexts, education primarily boosts political interest without significantly affecting broader participation. This divergence highlights the importance of considering cultural and demographic contexts when assessing the impact of education on women's political agency.

The findings of Naz and Ahmad (2012) and Khan et al. (2021) emphasize the critical role of education in reducing the gender gap in political involvement and enhancing women's political agency. Naz and Ahmad argue that education empowers women to overcome traditional barriers, thereby enabling them to participate more actively in politics. Similarly, Khan et al. highlight that educated women in rural Pakistan demonstrate higher political

knowledge and participation, suggesting that education plays a transformative role even in restrictive environments. However, the current study, focusing on highly educated urban women, reveals a nuanced reality. While education significantly enhances women's political interest, making them more informed, confident, and engaged in political discussions and voting, it does not strongly influence broader political participation activities, such as joining political parties or participating in demonstrations. This disparity may stem from contextual differences: In rural Pakistan, as highlighted by Khan et al. (2021), education might be the primary avenue for women to gain access to political knowledge and opportunities, making its impact more pronounced. Conversely, in urban settings where women already benefit from better access to resources and exposure, the incremental effect of education on political participation may diminish.

Naz and Ahmad (2012) and Khan et al. (2021) consider general political knowledge and participation, including less intensive forms of engagement, such as voting or attending local events. The present study, however, focuses on a broader spectrum of involvement, finding that education has a limited direct impact on more active and visible political involvement. For highly educated urban women, societal norms, safety concerns, and structural limitations may outweigh the role of education in facilitating active participation. These constraints may not be as pronounced in rural studies, where education serves as a gateway to political agency. The historical trajectory of women's political participation in Pakistan underscores the enduring impact of conservative policies. At the same time, there have been periods of increased representation, but true empowerment remains a challenge due to cultural and religious barriers, even for highly educated women (Shaheer & Muhammad, 2023). The future of women's political engagement in Pakistan hinges on shifting societal perceptions, implementing legal reforms, and cultivating an environment of political awareness and advocacy that enables women to actively participate in governance without fear of cultural backlash or political marginalization (Shah & Zaman, 2022).

The divergence in findings suggests that the role of education in fostering political participation is heavily context-dependent. Sociocultural barriers, combined with a lack of institutional support, have led to persistently low levels of women's political engagement in Pakistan, despite legislative measures aimed at improving representation (Saeed & Qureshi, 2023). Political participation among women is not only discouraged within families but also actively opposed at the community level (Bukhari & Ameer, 2022), where honor-based traditions further reinforce female exclusion from decision-making processes (Burnet, 2020).

While education may bridge gender gaps and promote agency in restrictive rural environments, its direct influence in urban settings with pre-existing advantages is less significant. This finding underscores the importance of considering both demographic and structural factors when assessing the impact of education on women's political engagement. In many parts of Pakistan, women are not permitted to leave their homes unaccompanied, making participation in political rallies, discussions, and campaign activities nearly impossible (Ibrahim & Ahmad, 2022). Even educated and politically aware women face family-imposed restrictions on travel, with male guardians refusing to allow them to attend political meetings, vote at polling stations, or participate in community leadership activities

(Raza & Hussain, 2022). The fear of public visibility and the stigma associated with being seen in mixed-gender spaces deter many women from actively pursuing political ambitions (Shah, 2023). The negligible role of interest in demonstrations as a predictor of participation highlights the contextual specificity of political engagement in Pakistan. This finding aligns with Fleschenberg and Bari's (2015) observation that sociocultural norms and security considerations influence women's political behaviors, steering them toward less aggressive forms of participation, such as discussions and campaigns.

The study reveals a moderate and significant positive relationship between political interest and political participation among highly educated urban women in Pakistan, with specific dimensions, such as interest in political discussions, campaigns, and party performance, emerging as the strongest predictors of participation. However, interest in demonstrations was not a significant driver of political involvement, highlighting the influence of sociocultural and security concerns on preferred forms of engagement. While education significantly enhances political interest, its direct effect on political participation is minimal, suggesting that structural and cultural barriers, such as entrenched patriarchy, traditional gender roles, and societal resistance, continue to limit women's active political engagement despite their educational attainment. These findings underscore the context-dependent nature of political participation, suggesting that while education fosters awareness and interest, broader participation remains hindered by persistent sociocultural constraints.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the intricate relationship between political interest, education, and political participation among highly educated urban women in Pakistan, offering nuanced insights into their civic engagement. The findings reveal that education significantly enhances political interest by equipping women with knowledge, critical reasoning, and analytical skills that deepen their understanding of political systems and processes. Educated women demonstrate greater curiosity about political affairs, show awareness of governmental activities, and are more likely to engage in informed discussions and evaluate political parties and election campaigns. However, while education cultivates political awareness, its influence on actual political participation remains limited. The results indicate that formal education motivates women to exercise their voting rights but does not substantially translate into active participation in political organizations, demonstrations, or leadership roles. This restricted impact appears to stem from entrenched sociocultural and structural constraints that continue to shape women's political behavior. Social expectations, family influence, safety concerns, and gendered perceptions of public engagement often define the boundaries of acceptable political involvement, thereby discouraging women—even highly educated women—from pursuing visible or confrontational forms of participation. Consequently, education alone is insufficient to overcome the cultural and institutional barriers that regulate women's political agency. The study highlights that while political interest is an essential precursor to participation, it requires an enabling environment supported by inclusive social norms, gender-sensitive political institutions, and awareness programs that translate knowledge into action. Addressing these contextual barriers is vital for expanding women's participation beyond voting and for ensuring that education becomes a transformative force for political empowerment rather than a passive source of awareness. Ultimately, fostering

equitable political engagement among women in Pakistan demands both structural reforms and cultural shifts that align educational gains with active and sustained political participation.

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