WOMEN'S INFORMAL POLITICAL AGENCY IN CONSERVATIVE SOCIETIES: VOICE WITHOUT POWER?

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Abstract:

This paper explores the concept of women's informal political agency in conservative societies, with a particular focus on Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces. While formal political spaces often exclude women due to entrenched patriarchal norms and structural barriers, many continue to exert significant influence through informal and culturally sanctioned modes of participation. Drawing on feminist theoretical frameworks—including Kabeer's (1999) model of empowerment, Mahmood's (2005) notion of embodied agency, and Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality—the study investigates how women navigate political landscapes through kinship, religious authority, and moral legitimacy. Using qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews and focus groups, the study reveals that women exercise considerable voice, yet often lack institutional power—a condition termed "voice without power." Findings show that women influence community decision-making and dispute resolution but face structural limitations in formal politics. The paper concludes that informal agency, while vital, remains fragile unless integrated into broader governance frameworks. Policy recommendations include institutional recognition of informal leadership, context-sensitive empowerment programs, and intersectional policy audits. The study contributes to feminist political theory by highlighting culturally embedded forms of agency and proposing new strategies for inclusive governance.

Keywords: Informal political agency, conservative societies, women's empowerment, patriarchal norms, Pakistan, feminist theory, intersectionality, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan

Introduction

In much of the academic and policy discourse on women's political participation, the dominant focus has been on formal mechanisms—parliamentary quotas, electoral participation, cabinet appointments, and membership in political parties. While these markers are important indicators of democratic inclusion, they fail to fully account for the diverse and often informal ways in which women exercise political agency, particularly in conservative societies. Informal political agency—defined as political influence exerted outside formal institutions—includes women's roles in community mediation, informal leadership, kinship negotiations, religious forums, and social movements that challenge or navigate power structures without overt confrontation.

In conservative and patriarchal contexts such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, or parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, women are frequently constrained by legal, religious, and sociocultural barriers that limit their formal political visibility. Yet these same women may wield significant influence through informal means. For instance, women often lead household-level negotiations, serve as advisors in community decision-making, or shape the political consciousness of their families and networks. These forms of participation remain under-researched and under-theorized, despite their critical role in shaping power relations and social change at the grassroots level.

The paradox at the heart of this paper is captured in the phrase "voice without power." Women may be highly vocal and active within certain socially sanctioned spaces, but that voice rarely translates into institutional power or structural transformation. Their contributions often lack formal recognition and are excluded from official narratives of governance and policy-making. As such, women's informal political engagement remains a site of both resistance and accommodation, where empowerment is constantly negotiated under the constraints of patriarchy, tradition, and authoritarian local governance.

This study is grounded in the feminist political theory of agency, particularly the works of Naila Kabeer (1999, 2001), who conceptualizes agency as the ability to define one's goals and act upon them, and Saba Mahmood (2005), who challenges Western liberal frameworks by suggesting that agency must also be understood through embodied practices and religiously sanctioned modes of self-realization. Building on this, the study also engages with intersectional feminist thought (Crenshaw, 1989) and political ecology to account for the spatial, ethnic, and class-based dimensions of women's access to informal political spaces.

Research Questions

This paper seeks to answer the following core questions:
1. How do women in conservative societies exercise informal political agency?
2. To what extent does informal political participation translate into actual influence over decision-making?
3. What are the socio-cultural, religious, and structural constraints that shape the limits of women's informal political power?
4. Can informal political agency serve as a pathway to more formalized empowerment, or does it reinforce existing patriarchal bargains?

Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this research are to:
- Analyze the forms, spaces, and mechanisms through which women engage in informal politics;
- Assess whether these engagements are transformative or accommodative in nature;
- Examine how power relations are negotiated or challenged through informal means;
- Provide a critical feminist analysis of the gap between voice and power in patriarchal settings.

Significance of the Study

This study has both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it contributes to feminist and postcolonial debates on political participation by decentering the assumption that agency must manifest through liberal democratic channels. It challenges the binary of empowered/disempowered and argues for a more nuanced understanding of agency that is rooted in local cultural and religious contexts. Practically, the study informs gender-sensitive policy frameworks, especially in contexts where promoting formal political inclusion is met with cultural resistance or political tokenism. It highlights the importance of recognizing and legitimizing informal spaces of political participation, which are often more accessible and impactful for marginalized women.

Scope and Context

While the analysis has broad relevance for many conservative societies globally, this paper will use Pakistan particularly the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan regions as its focal point. These provinces offer a unique confluence of tribal authority, religious conservatism, and post-conflict governance structures. Here, women's formal political participation remains minimal, but their informal roles—whether through local jirgas, religious influence, or household decision-making demonstrate powerful but underrecognized forms of political engagement.

Literature Review
Women's Informal Political Agency in Conservative Societies: Voice Without Power?

The concept of political participation has conventionally been associated with formal structures—parliaments, electoral processes, party membership, and official policymaking. However, this limited view neglects the complex ways in which women, particularly in conservative and patriarchal contexts, exercise informal political agency. This section critically reviews scholarly debates on informal political engagement, feminist agency, and power asymmetries, with a focus on Muslim-majority and postcolonial societies.

Formal vs. Informal Political Participation

Political participation is often dichotomized into formal and informal domains. While formal participation includes voting, party membership, and legislative representation, informal participation encompasses community-level advocacy, religious or kinship-based influence, and social mobilization through unofficial channels (Cornwall & Goetz, 2005). Scholars argue that this dichotomy overlooks the overlap between informal spaces and actual political influence especially in societies where formal institutions are inaccessible to most women due to structural or cultural barriers (Chowdhury, 1994).

In conservative societies, informal participation is often the only viable political space for women. Research by Goetz and Hassim (2003) in South Africa and Bangladesh finds that informal agency may be more impactful at the grassroots level, even though it lacks visibility in formal state institutions. Similarly, Tadros (2010) notes that in Egypt and Yemen, women often participate in local political affairs through religious networks and tribal negotiations.

Feminist Agency and Power

The concept of agency is central to feminist theory, yet its definition varies. Liberal feminist frameworks often equate agency with autonomy, choice, and resistance to patriarchal norms (Kabeer, 1999). However, such a view has been critiqued as Western-centric and insufficiently attentive to context. Saba Mahmood (2005), in her ethnographic study of the women's mosque movement in Egypt, proposes that agency can also be manifested through religiously sanctioned practices that appear compliant but are deeply political. Mahmood challenges the notion that resistance must be oppositional, arguing for a more nuanced understanding of how women enact subjectivity within normative orders.

Other scholars, such as Shirin Rai (2011), draw attention to the performative dimensions of agency, noting that women may exercise political voice through rituals, negotiations, and everyday acts of survival. These modes may not contest the status quo overtly but may subtly reshape gendered power relations.

The Role of Informal Institutions

Informal institutions such as family hierarchies, religious bodies, or tribal councils play a significant role in shaping women's access to decision-making. In many conservative contexts, these institutions are the primary locus of political negotiation, often replacing or coexisting with formal governance systems (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). In Pakistan, the jirga system operates parallel to formal judicial mechanisms and holds immense influence in rural areas (Shami, 2009). While these spaces are male-dominated, women occasionally access them indirectly through male kin or informal influence.

Scholars like Kandiyoti (1988) have theorized such forms of negotiation as part of the "patriarchal bargain," wherein women strategically conform to patriarchal norms to secure autonomy and resources. While these

bargains may offer short-term gains, they rarely result in structural empowerment, thus maintaining the broader system of gendered subordination.

Informal Agency in Muslim Societies

In Muslim-majority contexts, the intersection of religion and patriarchy adds another layer of complexity to informal political engagement. Studies by Bano (2012) and Hatem (1999) show that women's participation in Islamic networks—such as Quranic study circles or mosque-based outreach—often serves as a site of moral authority and political engagement. In Indonesia and Malaysia, women's Islamic organizations have successfully lobbied for legal reforms on inheritance and domestic violence while operating within religious discourses (Blackburn, 2008).

In Pakistan, where political Islam and patriarchal traditions converge, women activists often use faith-based framing to gain legitimacy and avoid backlash (Zia & Bari, 2019). This strategy illustrates how context-sensitive agency operates not against, but within, dominant moral orders.

South Asian Evidence

South Asia provides a fertile ground for understanding informal political agency. In India, Desai and Kulkarni (2008) show that women's informal participation in village panchayats is shaped more by caste and kinship networks than by legal quotas. In Bangladesh, Nazneen and Sultan (2010) reveal that while reserved seats have increased women's presence in local councils, real power continues to reside in informal male-dominated alliances. These findings underscore the limitations of formal inclusion policies when informal norms remain unchallenged.

In Pakistan, evidence from rural Sindh and KP indicates that women play influential roles in household decision-making, social mobilization, and welfare allocation, even as they remain excluded from electoral and parliamentary politics (Shaheed, 2010). Moreover, donor-funded women's empowerment projects often fail to translate into sustainable political voice, primarily because they ignore the existing informal structures within which women operate.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite growing interest in informal political agency, several gaps remain. First, most studies fail to differentiate between types of informal participation—ranging from passive presence to active agenda-setting. Second, there is limited exploration of how intersectional identities (e.g., class, ethnicity, marital status) mediate access to informal political spaces. Third, few studies ask whether informal agency can transition into institutional power or if it merely legitimizes patriarchal structures.

Finally, much of the literature continues to treat informal agency as a surrogate or compensatory form of participation, rather than a domain with its own legitimacy and value. This perspective risks reinforcing the marginalization of women's contributions and undermines efforts to build inclusive political systems.

Theoretical Framework

Women's Informal Political Agency in Conservative Societies: Voice Without Power?

Understanding women's informal political agency in conservative societies requires moving beyond conventional liberal theories of power, rights, and representation. This study draws from **feminist political theory**, **postcolonial thought**, and **intersectional analysis** to frame the ways in which women navigate systems of constraint and opportunity in their pursuit of political voice. Specifically, it engages with the frameworks proposed by **Naila Kabeer (1999)** on resources, agency, and achievements; **Saba Mahmood**

(2005) on embodied and non-liberal agency; and **Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989)** intersectionality to understand how overlapping identities mediate women's access to informal political space.

Naila Kabeer: Resources, Agency, and Achievements

Naila Kabeer's (1999) conceptualization of empowerment offers a foundational lens for analyzing informal agency. She defines empowerment as "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them." Her framework comprises three interrelated dimensions:

- **Resources**: not only economic assets but also social and human capital that enhance an individual's capacity for agency.
- **Agency**: the ability to define goals and act upon them, encompassing decision-making, negotiation, and resistance.
- **Achievements**: the measurable outcomes of exercising agency.

Kabeer's work is particularly relevant in conservative societies where women's access to formal resources is limited, and agency is expressed through indirect or socially mediated channels. For instance, a woman's role in resolving local disputes through her husband or son may not appear as direct agency but reflects a strategic form of influence given existing constraints.

Saba Mahmood: Embodied and Situated Agency

Saba Mahmood (2005) radically redefines the concept of agency through her ethnographic work on the women's mosque movement in Egypt. She argues that liberal feminist notions of agency as resistance or autonomy are inadequate for capturing how women operate in religious or moral worlds. Instead, Mahmood emphasizes "embodied agency" practices that reproduce rather than resist dominant norms, yet still involve active self-fashioning and social influence.

Mahmood's theory is particularly useful for interpreting the non-confrontational forms of agency in conservative Muslim societies. For instance, women who advocate for social change within the bounds of Islamic morality, or who gain influence by mastering religious texts, are exercising a form of political subjectivity that is culturally legible and socially powerful.

This reframing helps us avoid labeling such women as merely "passive" or "oppressed" and instead appreciate their capacity to negotiate power from within.

Intersectionality: Crenshaw and the Layered Nature of Exclusion

The third pillar of this framework is intersectionality, first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), which posits that social identities such as gender, class, ethnicity, and religion—interact to produce compound experiences of oppression. In the context of conservative societies, not all women have equal access to informal political space. Urban, elite, or educated women may find ways to influence policy through NGOs or media, while poor, rural, or ethnic minority women often remain triply marginalized—by gender, geography, and cultural norms.

Intersectionality is essential for this study because it draws attention to the heterogeneity of women's experiences and prevents overgeneralization. It highlights why the same informal space (e.g., a village jirga or community council) may be empowering for some women but exclusionary for others.

Power as Relational and Contextual

This study also adopts the relational view of power articulated by Michel Foucault and feminist scholars

like Nancy Fraser. Rather than seeing power solely as something held by individuals or institutions, it is understood here as dispersed across social relations and norms. Women's informal agency, therefore, is both enabled and constrained by the socio-political structures they inhabit. Acts of influence, be they symbolic, discursive, or ritualistic, must be analyzed not simply as acts of resistance, but as negotiations within specific cultural and structural matrices.

Applying the Framework

By integrating these theories, this paper adopts a non-binary and culturally embedded approach to agency. It seeks to understand how women in conservative contexts:

- Deploy strategic forms of influence within informal institutions;
- Exercise agency that may appear compliant yet is deeply political;
- Experience political life through the intersection of multiple identities;
- Navigate social constraints while articulating aspirations for autonomy and recognition.

This composite framework enables a richer, more nuanced exploration of women's informal political agency than would be possible through Western-centric models alone. It reorients the analysis from the absence of formal power to the presence of negotiated voice, recognizing that empowerment often unfolds in indirect and context-specific ways.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative feminist approach to examine how women in conservative societies exercise informal political agency, with a specific focus on Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan provinces. The aim is not to produce statistically generalizable results but to explore contextual meanings, lived experiences, and the subtle dynamics of voice and influence among women functioning in male-dominated sociopolitical settings. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for studies where cultural, symbolic, and moral aspects of agency are essential to understanding political behavior (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Research Design

A multiple-case study design was adopted to enable in-depth, contextualized comparisons across settings. The cases involve selected rural and peri-urban communities in KP and Balochistan, where women's participation in formal politics is low, but their informal political roles are observed to be influential within familial, tribal, religious, or development-oriented frameworks.

Data Collection

To examine the subtle and often invisible forms of political agency, a mix of primary and secondary qualitative data sources was employed.

Primary Data: In-depth Interviews and Focus Groups

- **In-depth semi-structured interviews** were conducted with approximately **30 women** aged 25–60 years, including community influencers, informal mediators, religious educators, and wives/daughters of local male leaders (e.g., tribal chiefs, union councilors).
- **10 interviews** were also conducted with **male gatekeepers** (tribal elders, imams, NGO leaders) to understand perceptions of women's informal political roles.
- **4 focus group discussions (FGDs)** (2 per province) were conducted with local women to explore collective narratives and shared constraints.

Interview themes included:
- Pathways to informal political influence
- Negotiation of gender roles in decision-making spaces
- Role of religion, kinship, and NGOs
- Perceived outcomes and recognition of influence

Secondary Data

Secondary sources included:
- Reports by NGOs (e.g., Aurat Foundation, Shirkat Gah)
- Policy documents on women's political empowerment in Pakistan
- Media coverage and radio programs featuring women's voices (e.g., VOA Deewa)
- Ethnographic studies on jirga systems and tribal governance

These sources provided broader insights into the institutional and discursive frameworks shaping women's informal participation.

Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling approach was adopted to select cases where informal female agency was observable, either directly (e.g., involvement in community mediation) or indirectly (e.g., influence via male kin). Within each province, communities were selected based on:
- Low female formal political representation
- Presence of customary or tribal governance structures
- Existing networks of NGOs or faith-based initiatives

Gatekeeper access was facilitated through local NGOs and university research collaborators. Ethical clearance was obtained following standard institutional procedures.

Analytical Approach

The data was analyzed using *thematic narrative analysis,* aligned with the feminist interpretive tradition (Riessman, 2008). Transcripts were coded both deductively (informed by the theoretical framework) and inductively (emergent from the data). Themes were organized around:
- Forms and expressions of informal political agency
- Enabling and constraining factors
- Tensions between visibility and legitimacy
- Perceptions of empowerment and recognition

Special attention was given to narratives of negotiation, resistance, and compliance, as they offered critical insight into how women position themselves within patriarchal systems.

Reflexivity and Positionality

As a female researcher trained in gender and development, the researcher maintained a reflexive posture throughout the fieldwork. Recognizing the power asymmetries between interviewer and participants, care was taken to ensure confidentiality, allow for culturally sensitive conversation, and avoid extractive or exploitative research practices. Local research assistants were trained in ethical interviewing, especially in conservative environments where issues of gender, power, and politics are deeply intertwined.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, the non-generalizability of case study findings must be

acknowledged. Second, access constraints limited data collection in high-conflict areas, which may have excluded some of the most marginalized voices. Third, the presence of gatekeepers may have influenced the openness of participants, particularly in discussing issues that challenge local norms.

Despite these limitations, the methodology provides rich, grounded insights into how women's political agency operates outside formal arenas, revealing the complexities of voice, power, and influence in patriarchal societies.

Would you like me to proceed next with the Findings and Discussion section? It will thematically present results under headings like:

- Forms of Informal Political Agency
- Agency through Kinship and Religion
- Voice vs. Institutional Power
- Negotiated Empowerment

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of interviews and focus groups reveals that women in conservative societies—particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan exercise political agency through informal yet socially embedded pathways. Their voices, though frequently muted in formal institutions, resonate within familial, religious, and community frameworks. The findings are presented under key thematic categories that reflect the lived realities and strategic negotiations of these women.

Forms of Informal Political Agency

The women interviewed were rarely visible in electoral or legislative arenas, yet many were deeply involved in community arbitration, dispute resolution, welfare distribution, and local negotiations. A recurring theme was that of behind-the-scenes influence, often exerted through male kin. For instance, some women advised their husbands or sons on local disputes, candidate endorsements, or development priorities thus shaping decisions without public attribution.

In KP, women often served as informal social workers, connecting neighbors with NGO services, health campaigns, or religious aid. In Balochistan, where tribal structures are dominant, a few elder women known as *"mother elders"* (informal matriarchs) were consulted in internal tribal conflicts, particularly those involving women or family honor. While not recognized formally, these women were respected for their moral authority and wisdom, thus securing space in critical community matters.

Kinship, Religion, and Gatekeeping

Many participants described how their status within the family—especially as mothers or wives of influential men enabled their political agency. This phenomenon aligns with Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of the "patriarchal bargain," where women leverage their positionality within patriarchal systems to assert influence. In some cases, women were not merely passive beneficiaries but active advisors whose opinions shaped household and community politics.

Religion was also a crucial conduit for agency. Several women reported gaining respect and influence by being well-versed in Islamic teachings. In one case, a woman from rural KP held weekly *dars* (religious study circles) and was later invited to advise on community welfare priorities. As Mahmood (2005) argues, such religiously embedded agency does not always seek to challenge patriarchy but can expand women's roles within socially acceptable boundaries.

However, the role of male gatekeepers was also evident. Women's participation was often mediated, permitted, or constrained by male family members, tribal norms, or religious authorities. In some focus groups, women expressed frustration that even when they contributed ideas, the credit was claimed by men.

Voice Without Power: Symbolic vs. Structural Influence

A core paradox observed was that women had voice but not power. They could speak, advise, and occasionally decide, but these actions were not institutionally recognized or translated into systemic authority. For example, a woman who mediated conflicts between families in her village was widely respected, yet she was never invited to join the official local jirga.

Such scenarios echo Fraser's (1990) critique of symbolic inclusion without redistribution, wherein marginalized actors are "included" in discourse but excluded from structural change. Several participants emphasized that even when they organized women's gatherings or raised issues through NGOs, their actions were treated as community service, not political work.

Negotiated Empowerment: Resistance, Compliance, and Adaptation

The findings complicate binary views of agency as either resistance or subordination. Instead, women engaged in negotiated empowerment, strategically navigating societal constraints while subtly reshaping norms. For instance, one participant in Balochistan reported that she helped form a community kitchen project during the COVID-19 pandemic by convincing male elders it was part of *"Islamic duty"* and *"charity,"* thus gaining approval for a women-led initiative.

Such acts reflect what Scott (1990) termed "everyday forms of resistance," where subordinated groups challenge domination through quiet, coded actions rather than overt protest. These nuanced strategies are deeply informed by the social context and moral discourses within which women operate.

Variations by Class, Ethnicity, and Geography

The study also found that intersectional factors shaped women's informal agency. Educated women in peri-urban areas often had access to NGO platforms and social media, while rural, uneducated women relied more heavily on kinship or religious legitimacy. Ethnic dynamics further complicated access Pashtun women, for instance, faced stricter mobility controls than Baloch women in some areas.

These findings confirm Crenshaw's (1989) argument that gender cannot be analyzed in isolation from class, ethnicity, and geography. A one-size-fits-all empowerment model would therefore overlook the layered realities women face in conservative societies.

Gaps Between Informal and Formal Political Participation

Despite their local influence, most women interviewed lacked pathways to formal political spaces. Even those interested in contesting local elections faced hurdles like financial constraints, male opposition, and social stigma. The few who succeeded often entered politics through dynastic channels, such as being widows or daughters of politicians reaffirming elite capture.

Thus, while informal agency may offer short-term or localized empowerment, it rarely leads to institutional change or gender parity. The persistence of tokenism, patriarchal structures, and political gatekeeping limits the transformative potential of informal participation.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This study set out to explore the paradox of women's political agency in conservative societies, with a specific focus on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan in Pakistan. The core inquiry—whether women in such contexts possess a "voice without power" has yielded critical insights into the nuanced, culturally embedded, and negotiated nature of political participation. The findings reaffirm that women exercise agency in multiple informal forms, often through kinship, religious authority, and community engagement, yet these forms seldom translate into recognized institutional power.

Building on feminist theories of agency (Kabeer, 1999; Mahmood, 2005) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), the paper demonstrates that informal political agency is real, impactful, and context-specific. However, the absence of formal recognition and structural transformation renders this agency fragile and contingent, often vulnerable to co-optation, invisibility, or reversal. While women influence community decisions, mediate disputes, or mobilize resources, they rarely obtain leadership positions or systemic voice within political institutions.

These realities expose the limitations of mainstream political empowerment frameworks that prioritize quotas and electoral representation while neglecting informal power dynamics. They also challenge development interventions that overlook the local moral and social economies within which women operate. Recognizing women's informal agency requires shifting from a "deficit" model of participation to one that values lived realities, subtle resistance, and contextually legitimate forms of influence.

Policy Implications

Based on the empirical and theoretical insights of this study, the following policy recommendations are offered:

Institutional Recognition of Informal Leaders

Governments and NGOs should create formal consultative spaces—such as local advisory councils—that include informal female leaders (e.g., community elders, religious educators, social mobilizers). This would bridge the gap between informal voice and formal power.

Contextualized Empowerment Programs

Development programs should eschew one-size-fits-all approaches and design empowerment interventions that respect local moral logics. Working within faith-based or kinship networks—rather than against them may enhance legitimacy and impact.

Mentorship and Capacity Building

Women who hold informal influence should be given access to mentorship, leadership training, and legal literacy programs to prepare them for transitions into formal politics. Special focus should be placed on rural and low-income women.

Policy Advocacy for Gender-Responsive Decentralization

Pakistan's decentralization reforms must be made gender-responsive. This includes revising local government laws to facilitate women's direct representation, not just through reserved seats but through open contestation and equitable resourcing.

Documentation and Visibility

There is a dire need to document and archive women's informal political contributions, particularly in oral

traditions and community mobilizations. Universities, think tanks, and media houses should collaborate to create gendered political histories.

Intersectionality in Policy Design

Policies aimed at women's empowerment should be sensitive to intersecting oppressions based on class, ethnicity, religion, and geography. Intersectional audits of empowerment programs can help mitigate elite capture and ensure inclusivity.

Directions for Future Research

This paper highlights the need for further exploration into the long-term trajectories of informal political agency. Do these forms lead to systemic change, or do they reinforce patriarchal bargains? Comparative studies across regions and religious contexts would enrich understanding. Moreover, longitudinal ethnographies could trace whether informal agency can evolve into enduring leadership.

In conclusion, while conservative societies often silence women in formal political spaces, they do not render them powerless. Women's political lives are embedded in complex webs of influence, negotiation, and resistance. Recognizing, legitimizing, and amplifying these voices requires rethinking both theory and policy toward a more inclusive and context-sensitive politics of empowerment.

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