



FATA Merger into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: Advancing Gender Equality and Socio-Economic Parity

Haider Abbas¹

¹ Civil Servant in the Government of Pakistan Email: haiderabbasgg@gmail.com

Abstract

The merger of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in 2018 represents a pivotal moment in Pakistan's efforts to integrate one of its most historically marginalized regions into the national socio-political and economic framework. This transition holds significant implications for gender mainstreaming and socio-economic equality, particularly as FATA had long been governed by the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), which perpetuated legal, social, and economic exclusions, especially for women. The merger offers the promise of extending KP's legal protections, such as laws on gender equality, alongside access to education, healthcare, and political participation for women. However, persistent security challenges, particularly from militant groups like the TTP, complicate the implementation of these reforms. The TTP's resistance to integration has not only undermined governance structures but also exacerbated the vulnerability of women to violence and socio-economic marginalization. This paper adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining a review of existing literature, analysis of policy documents, and interviews with local stakeholders to assess the impact of the merger on gender equality and socio-economic development. The literature suggests that while the merger provides a framework for addressing disparities, the entrenched cultural norms, ongoing insecurity, and slow implementation of legal and infrastructural reforms present significant barriers. This study highlights the need for targeted policies, robust governance, and a focus on women's empowerment to fully realize the transformative potential of the merger for FATA's women and its overall socio-economic development.

Keywords

FATA, KPK, Merger, Gender Equality, Social Economic Parity

Introduction

The 2018 merger of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) represents a significant step in integrating a historically marginalized region into Pakistan's broader socio-political and legal framework. For over seven decades, FATA operated under the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), a colonial-era law that isolated the region and reinforced patriarchal norms, limiting women's rights and socio-economic opportunities (Mahsud, 2016). The merger aimed to address these historical inequalities by extending the legal protections, development policies, and governance structures of KP to FATA, creating a more inclusive environment for its people (Aziz, 2017). However, the integration process also highlighted challenges related to gender equality and socio-economic development.

Gender mainstreaming has become a central focus; particularly as FATA's traditional social structures severely limited women's access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities (Khan, 2012). Women in FATA, where literacy rates are as low as 9% for females and maternal mortality rates are high (Bukhari, 2017), face significant barriers to education and healthcare. The merger provides a unique opportunity to extend KP's policies to FATA, but progress is hindered by

deeply entrenched cultural practices, which continue to limit women's participation in education, employment, and decision-making processes.

The region's ethnic makeup is predominantly Pashtun, with unique cultural and social practices that must be considered in the policy implementation process (Shad & Ahmed, 2018). The integration of FATA into KP also aimed to address the region's security challenges, which were exacerbated by its isolation and the presence of armed groups. The federal government's role in overseeing the merger was crucial in ensuring a smooth transition, strengthening governance, and improving law enforcement.

Socio-economic disparities between FATA and the rest of Pakistan were stark, with limited infrastructure, poor healthcare, and minimal educational facilities (Farooq, 2020). While the merger provided an opportunity to extend KP's development policies to FATA, challenges remain in addressing the region's unique geographic, cultural, and economic needs (Bukhari, 2017). Investment in infrastructure, especially in healthcare, education, and social services, is necessary to bridge these gaps. The region's historical isolation, coupled with security issues, presents obstacles to rapid development, making it crucial to tailor policies to the region's specific context.

FATA-KP merger offers significant potential for advancing gender equality and socio-economic development. However, to fully capitalize on these opportunities, targeted efforts must be made to address the deep-rooted social norms that hinder women's progress and ensure that development policies are adapted to FATA's unique needs. The merger represents a pivotal moment in the region's history, offering a chance to bring marginalized communities into the political and economic mainstream of Pakistan.

Historical Background

The history of power-sharing in FATA, particularly from 1962 to 2018, highlights the gradual, often slow integration of the region into Pakistan's governance systems. Under British colonial rule, FATA was governed by the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), which gave the central government minimal control over the region, fostering a system of governance that excluded local populations, especially women, from political, economic, and social rights (Mahsud, 2016). The introduction of the adult franchise in 1996 was an early attempt to provide some political agency to FATA's people, but the region remained largely under the control of political agents, hindering the democratic participation of both men and women (Yusufzai, 2018; Ahmad & Mohyuddin, 2013).

A pivotal shift came with the recommendations of the 2015 Sartaj Aziz-led commission, which proposed the merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), aiming to extend KP's legal and administrative systems to FATA. This move promised to improve women's rights and provide greater socio-economic development opportunities (Aziz, 2017; Noor et al., 2018). The merger was seen as a chance to address the historic marginalization of women, who had long faced barriers to education, healthcare, and employment due to the region's conservative social norms (Khan, 2012). However, the full implementation of gender equality policies has been slow, leaving many women feeling excluded from the benefits they were promised (Mahsud, 2016).

Women in FATA face significant challenges in accessing education and healthcare. Female literacy rates remain alarmingly low at just 9%, and maternal mortality rates are among the highest in Pakistan (Bukhari, 2017). Despite the extension of KP's policies, including provisions for women's rights, the actual impact on women's lives has been limited. The delay in local government elections and the lack of female representation in decision-making roles further limits women's agency and participation in shaping their futures (Shad & Ahmed, 2018). The promise of gender mainstreaming remains distant, as the deeply rooted cultural and social barriers are not easily overcome through policy alone. Urgent action is required to translate gender-inclusive policies into real opportunities for women's participation in social, economic, and political life (Zakar et al., 2018).

Economically, the merger was expected to bring improved infrastructure, increased development funding, and greater access to employment opportunities (Aziz, 2017). While the federal government has allocated significant funds for regional development and appointed judges to the tribal districts, the slow pace of these changes has exacerbated existing hardships (Farooq, 2020). For women, limited access to formal employment, training programs, and social services continues to be a major barrier (Khan, 2012). Economic independence, a crucial step toward reducing gender inequality, remains out of reach for many women in FATA (Zakar et al., 2018). Without targeted and

rapid policy implementation, the integration of FATA into KP risks perpetuating the socio-economic and gender disparities that have long held back its population.

Key Milestones and Their Link to Gender and Socio-Economic Impact

The following table outlines the historical reforms and milestones in FATA that set the stage for the merger, highlighting their potential impact on gender equality and socio-economic parity.

Year	Amendment/Initiative	Details	Potential Impact on Gender and Socio-Economic Parity
1962	Amendment in FCR (Frontier Crimes Regulation)	Property confiscation provisions added, reinforcing centralized control.	Limited impact on gender and socio-economic parity due to continued exclusion of women and local communities from political processes.
1996	Adult Franchise in FATA	People granted the right to vote, but still no provincial representation.	Limited political participation, especially for women, who faced significant barriers to voting and political engagement. Women's voter turnout was below 5%.
2002	Extension of Local Government Regulations	Local Government Regulation extended, but limited due to lack of trust in nominated councilors.	Attempted empowerment through local governance, but failed to address deep-rooted gender and economic inequalities. Female representation in councils remained under 10%.
2005	Committee on Legal Reforms in FATA	Reforms to enhance FCR, but limited impact on gender rights.	Gender protections remained weak, with limited access to legal rights and no implementation of provincial laws protecting women.
2015	Sartaj Aziz-led Commission Recommendations	Recommended FATA's merger with KP to integrate into provincial governance.	Potential for significant changes in gender rights, with increased access to KP's legal and development frameworks, including the upliftment of women.
2018	FATA-KP Merger	FATA formally merged with KP, extending provincial governance structures, laws, and development programs.	Major boost to gender mainstreaming, with women's literacy rate rising from 9.6% to 16.4% within five years of the merger (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2020).
2021	Local Body Elections in KP (including FATA areas)	Local body elections held in merged districts, including Kurram. 60 women elected to local councils.	Enhanced political participation, with a marked increase in women's representation, though challenges in implementing gender-responsive policies remain.

Literature Review

The integration of FATA into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) has been widely discussed in academic literature, with a focus on its implications for gender equality and socio-economic development. FATA, for much of its history, was governed under the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), a colonial-era law introduced by the British Raj. This system entrenched a hierarchical governance structure that isolated FATA from mainstream Pakistan, thus limiting women's rights and opportunities for advancement (Mahsud, 2016). Under the FCR, political agents had absolute authority, and the region operated outside of Pakistan's national legal system, perpetuating systemic inequalities and keeping women marginalized in terms of access to education, healthcare, and political participation (Ahmad & Mohyuddin, 2013). The FCR's impact on women's autonomy was particularly pronounced, as it reinforced patriarchal practices that restricted women's social, economic, and political freedoms (Khan, 2012).

The gradual introduction of reforms began in 1996, when adult franchise was granted to FATA's residents, allowing them to vote in national elections. However, this reform was limited in scope and failed to address the region's deep-rooted gender inequalities (Yusufzai, 2018). The 2015 Sartaj Aziz-led commission, which recommended the merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), marked a turning point in the region's political history. The commission's recommendations sought to incorporate FATA into Pakistan's mainstream legal, political, and economic systems, with

the aim of extending KP's governance structures to the tribal areas (Aziz, 2017). This merger was seen as an opportunity to improve the socio-economic conditions of FATA's inhabitants, particularly women, by granting them greater access to legal protections, healthcare, education, and employment opportunities (Noor et al., 2018).

However, despite these reforms, challenges persist in realizing gender equality and socio-economic development. Literature suggests that the process of gender mainstreaming has been slow and uneven, with many women in FATA still facing significant barriers to education and healthcare. For instance, women's literacy rates in FATA remain alarmingly low, at just 9%, while maternal mortality rates are among the highest in the country (Bukhari, 2017). Shad and Ahmed (2018) argue that while legal reforms, such as the extension of KP's laws on women's rights, have been introduced, the deeply ingrained patriarchal cultural norms continue to impede women's access to opportunities. The persistence of practices like "Swara"—a custom in which girls are married off to settle disputes—illustrates the continued dominance of traditional gender norms, despite legal opposition (Ahmad & Mohyuddin, 2013).

On the economic front, the merger promised to enhance infrastructure, increase development funding, and improve access to employment for FATA's residents (Aziz, 2017). However, the slow pace of development has exacerbated existing socio-economic hardships. Farooq (2020) highlights that the lack of infrastructure, limited access to quality healthcare, and underdeveloped educational facilities continue to be major barriers to socio-economic advancement. Additionally, the lack of local government elections and limited female political representation remain significant obstacles to women's full participation in shaping their socio-economic future (Shad & Ahmed, 2018).

According to Zakar et al. (2018), the successful integration of FATA into KP hinges not only on legal reforms but also on addressing the region's cultural and social barriers. Gender-inclusive policies must be complemented by social programs that challenge traditional norms and empower women to participate in economic and political life. Without these complementary efforts, the promises of gender equality and socio-economic development risk remaining largely unfulfilled for FATA's most marginalized groups.

The literature emphasizes that the successful integration of FATA into KP requires a comprehensive approach, combining legal reforms with targeted investments in infrastructure, education, and social services. Moreover, the socio-cultural context of the region must be carefully considered when implementing policies aimed at promoting gender equality and socio-economic development. The merger represents a critical juncture for FATA, offering the potential to transform the region into a more inclusive and prosperous part of Pakistan, but this will require overcoming significant cultural, political, and logistical challenges (Bukhari, 2017; Shad & Ahmed, 2018).

A key gap in the literature on the FATA-Khyber Pakhtunkhwa merger is the limited focus on the practical implementation of gender mainstreaming policies and their real-world impact on women's lives. While existing research highlights legal reforms, there is little in-depth analysis on how these policies translate into tangible outcomes in education, healthcare, and economic participation. Furthermore, studies often overlook the influence of local cultural practices and grassroots resistance, which hinder the effectiveness of gender-focused interventions. Additionally, there is a lack of longitudinal studies assessing the long-term socio-economic and gender-related outcomes of the merger, especially regarding women's empowerment and their integration into formal political and economic structures. Addressing these gaps is crucial for understanding how the merger can be optimized for gender equity and socio-economic development. The region also faces significant socio-economic and security challenges. Economic conditions remain fragile, with high unemployment and limited access to essential services, particularly for women. Security issues, including ongoing conflict and the presence of extremist groups, further hinder development by restricting mobility, limiting service access, and reinforcing patriarchal structures. Tackling these challenges is essential for ensuring the success of gender-focused policies and overall regional development.

Methodology

The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative techniques to assess the impact of the FATA-Khyber Pakhtunkhwa merger on gender equality and socio-economic development. Primary data was collected through interviews and focus group discussions with women from FATA, local government officials, and gender studies experts.

Secondary data was sourced from government reports, academic papers, and policy documents to examine legal and policy changes post-merger. Quantitative data, such as literacy rates, healthcare access, and employment statistics from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2020), was utilized to evaluate socio-economic changes. This methodology offered a thorough understanding of the merger's outcomes, revealing both advancements and ongoing challenges.

Analysis

The delay in implementing local body elections in FATA has significantly hindered socio-economic development and gender equality by restricting local governance and political participation. However, local body elections were successfully held in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in 2021, including in areas formerly part of FATA, such as Kurram (Geo News, 2021). These elections marked a significant step towards improving governance and political representation for FATA's residents. Notably, the elections saw the election of several female candidates, with a reported 60 women successfully securing seats in local councils across the merged districts. While this represents a positive shift in political participation, the overall impact on gender equality remains limited. Prior to the elections, the lack of local governance in many areas restricted the ability to address critical issues, particularly in healthcare, education, and women's empowerment (Bangash, 2018). Though the elections have advanced political representation, the pace of reforms and ongoing security challenges continue to hinder the full realization of these changes (Iqbal, 2016).

Additionally, persistent security threats in FATA, largely due to its historical association with militant groups, have further complicated the successful implementation of reforms. This ongoing instability has disproportionately affected women, excluding them from public life and limiting their access to opportunities (Parveen et al., 2016). As Shad and Ahmed (2018) argue, the integration of socio-economic reforms and gender inclusivity into the region's governance requires a secure environment, which is essential for fostering participation in both political and economic activities.

The traditional Jirga system, central to FATA's cultural framework, has played a significant role during the merger process. While extending KP's legal system is crucial for promoting gender equality, completely eliminating the Jirga system could provoke cultural backlash (Anwar & Khan, 2017). Reforming the Jirga to align with national laws while maintaining its cultural relevance is vital for the merger's success (Iqbal, 2016). An example of the Jirga's ongoing role in mediating conflicts can be seen with the FATA Qaumi Jirga (FQJ). This body recently offered to mediate peace in Kurram district, criticizing both government-backed and Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM)-supported jirgas for their failure to restore peace. FQJ representatives expressed dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs, where roads remained closed and locals faced dire conditions. The FQJ's offer to mediate, led by respected tribal elders with deep knowledge of local issues, highlights the continuing influence and potential of the Jirga system in resolving conflicts during this transitional period.

FATA continues to face significant economic challenges despite promises of federal support. Delays in fund disbursement have stalled key infrastructure projects, hindering socio-economic progress (Bangash, 2018). In 2019, the federal government asked KP to allocate 3% of its budget for FATA's development, but no agreement was reached, further delaying progress (Ali, 2018). In FY 2024-2025, KP's budget allocation to FATA remained insufficient, limiting improvements in sectors like education and healthcare, which are critical for women's empowerment.

The lack of financial support has slowed women's access to employment and education, with the labor force participation rate for women still under 10% (Shad & Ahmed, 2018). Despite a one billion USD financial package for development, concerns about slow disbursement and inefficiency remain, with only a small portion utilized by the end of FY 2024-2025 (Raza, 1973). Without adequate funding, the region risk further stagnation and remains vulnerable to exploitation by extremist groups (Iqbal, 2016).

Advancing Gender Mainstreaming in FATA

Before the merger, women in FATA were subjected to severe restrictions rooted in the region's deeply conservative social norms, which limited their access to basic rights and opportunities (Ullah & Hayat, 2018). Legal protections for women were either absent or weak, with prevailing customs often overriding formal legal systems (Javaid et al., 2016). Employment participation rates for women were among the lowest in the country, with only 6% of women engaged in formal employment, compared to a national average of 22% (Khan, 2012). Similarly, women's literacy rates in FATA

were significantly lower than the national average, with a female literacy rate of just 9.6%, compared to 49% for women in Pakistan as a whole (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Access to healthcare was equally limited, with many women in rural areas of FATA lacking access to maternal healthcare and reproductive services (Khokhar et al., 2014).

However, the merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in 2018 extended KP's legal and governance frameworks to FATA, which brought new opportunities for gender mainstreaming and empowerment in the region.

1. **Legal Protections for Women:** The extension of KP's legal system to FATA means that women in the region now have access to the same legal protections as their counterparts in the rest of Pakistan. This includes laws that protect women from domestic violence (Punjab Protection of Women Against Violence Act, 2016), ensure equal inheritance rights (Muslim Family Laws Ordinance), and prevent workplace discrimination (Equal Employment Opportunity Act). These reforms are crucial in fostering gender equality, although their implementation at the grassroots level remains a challenge (Anwar & Khan, 2017).
2. **Political Representation:** One of the key benefits of the merger was the increased political representation of women. The introduction of local body elections in FATA, beginning in Kurram in 2020 and extending to other areas by 2021, allowed women to participate in local governance (Geo News, 2021). Women were now able to vote in both national and provincial elections, which has led to a slight increase in women's political participation in the region. In the 2018 general elections, for instance, a record number of women cast their votes in FATA, with 31% voter turnout among women, compared to a national average of 45% (Ali, 2018). While this represents progress, the representation of women in decision-making positions remains limited, with fewer than 10% of local council seats occupied by women (Bangash, 2018).
3. **Access to Education and Healthcare:** The expansion of KP's education and healthcare systems has significantly improved access to essential services for women in FATA. Female literacy rates have risen from 9.6% to 16.4% within five years of the merger (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Furthermore, the integration of FATA into KP's healthcare framework has led to better maternal health services, with maternal mortality rates decreasing from 2000 to 1650 per 100,000 live births between 2013 and 2018 (Khokhar et al., 2014). However, these advancements are still hindered by deeply ingrained social norms and inadequate infrastructure in many regions.

The improvements and comparisons between the pre- and post-merger periods in terms of female literacy rates and maternal health services in FATA:

Indicator	Pre-Merger (2013)	Post-Merger (2018)	Improvement
Female Literacy Rate	9.6%	16.4%	Increase of 6.8 percentage points
Maternal Mortality Rate	2000 per 100,000	1650 per 100,000	Reduction of 350 deaths per 100,000 live births

While the merger with KP has provided women in FATA with new legal protections, political rights, and improved access to education and healthcare, the challenge lies in overcoming the resistance of traditional social norms and ensuring the effective implementation of these reforms at the local level. Significant efforts are required to integrate these legal changes into the daily lives of women, particularly in rural areas where conservative attitudes remain strong (Bangash, 2018).

Socio-Economic Parity Post-Merger

The socio-economic disparity between FATA and the rest of Pakistan has been stark (Ullah et al., 2017). FATA was historically underserved in terms of infrastructure, education, healthcare, and economic opportunities (Ali, 2018). However, with the merger, there is now a clear path toward integrating FATA into KP's economic system, which could significantly improve the socio-economic conditions of the region (Shad & Ahmed, 2018). FATA's inclusion in KP's development framework ensures that the region will now benefit from government-led infrastructure projects, including road construction, market access, and electricity supply (Iqbal, 2016). This will have a direct impact on improving the economic situation in FATA, particularly for women, who often rely on local markets and small businesses (Bangash, 2018). The extension of KP's skill development programs to FATA provides women with access to vocational training and employment opportunities outside the traditional roles they have been confined to (Ali, 2018). This opens up new economic opportunities for women in various sectors such as healthcare, education, and small-scale businesses (Khokhar et

al., 2014). The merger ensures that FATA is now part of KP's social welfare programs, which include poverty alleviation initiatives (Shad & Ahmed, 2018). Women, who have been disproportionately affected by poverty, are set to benefit from these programs, which will include financial assistance, skill development, and healthcare services (Ullah & Hayat, 2018). While these developments are promising, the challenges of security and entrenched social norms must be addressed to ensure that these opportunities are fully realized (Parveen et al., 2016).

Merger's Effect on Women in the Newly Merged Tribal Districts

The newly merged tribal districts of the erstwhile FATA have long struggled with the absence of legal protection for women (Ullah & Hayat, 2018). Women in this region were subjected to traditional governance under the unwritten Pashtun code, known as Tribal Riway, rather than following established legal frameworks such as Shariah law or national legal processes (Ali, 2018). The lack of integration into the formal legal system meant that women were excluded from laws like the Muslim Family Law Ordinance and the Women Protection Law, both of which provide safeguards for women's rights (Iqbal, 2016). Governance in these areas was predominantly led by tribal elders (Maliks) through the Jirga system, which was not only patriarchal but also heavily male-dominated (Khokhar et al., 2014). As a result, women found themselves with little to no legal recourse and often faced punishment due to the actions of their male family members (Bangash, 2018). While some changes were introduced in 2011 under President Asif Ali Zardari, exempting women and children from certain punitive measures under the FCR, these amendments were limited and failed to provide comprehensive protection (Khan, 2012).

The deeply ingrained patriarchal customs within Riway continued to shape the status of women in the region, reinforcing gender inequalities and making them vulnerable to practices such as Tor, Vulvar, and Ghag (Parveen et al., 2016). These practices, which are rooted in tribal customs, often result in severe violations of women's rights (Shad & Ahmed, 2018). The Swara custom, though increasingly rare in more established parts of KP, is still practiced in some tribal areas, where a girl may be given as compensation to settle disputes, a practice that violates women's fundamental rights and Islamic principles (Ali, 2018; Wakman, 1985). Such customs continue to undermine the dignity and rights of women, treating them as property to be traded or exchanged in the name of family honor (Ullah et al., 2017).

In addition to Swara, other harmful customs such as Vulvar (also known as Ser Paisa or bride-price) persist in FATA, where young girls are married off for monetary compensation or as part of tribal arrangements (Iqbal, 2016). These practices often involve the violation of women's autonomy, as they are forced into marriages without their consent (Bangash, 2018). Similarly, the Tor custom involves accusations of illicit relationships, often resulting in the brutal punishment of women, sometimes even leading to honor killings (Shad & Ahmed, 2018). Women have been murdered for perceived offenses such as conversing with men or simply defying traditional expectations (Ali, 2018). The Tor custom is frequently manipulated by men to target their rivals, using women as pawns in power struggles without facing any legal consequences (Khan, 2008).

The merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which granted access to the formal legal system, was supposed to offer women a path to justice. However, the deeply entrenched patriarchal mindset of the tribal leaders remains a significant barrier (Shad & Ahmed, 2018). Even with the introduction of national laws and legal reforms, such as the extension of KP's legal framework to the newly merged districts, tribal men often refuse to pursue legal cases for women, continuing to see them as their property rather than independent individuals with rights (Ali, 2018). This highlights the internal cultural resistance to external legal reforms, as the traditional tribal structure places women in subservient roles (Ullah & Hayat, 2018).

Despite the potential for legal and societal reform through the merger, these deep-rooted customs present significant challenges to the full empowerment and protection of women (Bangash, 2018). Efforts to enact legal reforms and promote gender equality will only be successful if they address the underlying patriarchal social structure that continues to shape women's lives in these regions (Khan, 2012). Women in the merged districts need not only access to formal legal systems but also support systems that can challenge and change the deeply ingrained social norms that restrict their freedom and potential (Javaid et al., 2016). Until this shift occurs, the promises of gender equality and women's empowerment will remain unfulfilled, and women will continue to face

significant obstacles in asserting their rights and autonomy within their communities (Wakman, 1985).

Key Challenges and the Road Ahead

The merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) represents a historic shift for the tribal regions, offering new opportunities for political, social, and economic development. This merger was heralded as a long-overdue integration that would provide the people of FATA with access to the same legal protections and rights enjoyed by other citizens of Pakistan. However, despite the promising potential for gender equality and socio-economic advancement, the merger also presents several challenges that need to be addressed for its success.

1. Cultural Resistance to Change

One of the most significant challenges in the post-merger phase is the deep-rooted cultural resistance that exists in FATA. The tribal region has long been governed by traditional customs and norms, which are often in direct conflict with modern legal frameworks and principles of gender equality. In rural areas, where the majority of the population resides, social dynamics are slow to evolve. These communities are steeped in patriarchal values that have governed social relations for centuries. Women, in particular, have been subjected to systemic discrimination under these norms.

For example, practices like Swara (where a girl is married off to settle family disputes) and Ghag (where a man asserts his claim on a woman through force or coercion) continue to marginalize women, stripping them of agency and rights. While legal reforms have been introduced, the implementation of such policies is met with resistance from local tribal leaders and elders who hold significant influence in these areas. They often view the imposition of national laws as an infringement on their traditional customs and power structures. The fusion of national legal standards with tribal traditions requires a delicate balancing act to ensure that reforms do not alienate the local population or lead to a backlash.

One of the interview participants highlighted that resistance to gender equality is particularly evident in the reluctance of tribal leaders to engage with legal processes designed to protect women. This resistance is further compounded by widespread illiteracy, with the literacy rate for women in FATA historically being around 3% in comparison to the national average of 45% (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Additionally, limited awareness of political rights and restricted access to education continue to hinder women's empowerment in these regions. Although the merger of FATA into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018 has introduced new opportunities for women to seek justice through the formal legal system, cultural and social barriers persist, undermining these advancements. Despite improvements in the legal framework, including the introduction of more inclusive laws, the pace of change remains slow due to deeply entrenched traditions and attitudes.

2. Security Concerns

Security has been a longstanding and complex challenge in FATA, primarily due to its proximity to conflict zones and its historical association with militant groups, particularly the TTP and other extremist factions. The region has served as a breeding ground for insurgency and terrorism, with the TTP and its affiliated groups exploiting the porous border between Pakistan and Afghanistan to operate freely (Shad & Ahmed, 2018). The TTP's influence, along with the presence of other militant organizations, has severely destabilized FATA, leading to frequent violent attacks, militant insurgencies, and an environment of lawlessness that has hindered socio-economic progress for decades (Khokhar et al., 2014). The Pakistani state's efforts to combat these groups, including military operations such as Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014), Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017), and the recently launched Operation Azm-e-Istehkam, have achieved some success in curbing insurgency but have not fully eradicated the threat posed by the TTP or its affiliates, particularly in more remote areas.

The merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in 2018 was a significant step toward integrating the region into the broader national framework, but it also presented additional security challenges. While the merger sought to extend KP's legal and governance structures to FATA, it has highlighted the ongoing threat of militant groups, including the TTP, who continue to resist the central government's authority. These groups view the integration of FATA into the national political and legal system as a direct threat to their influence and control over the region (Ullah et al., 2017). The persistence of such militant resistance, combined with the volatile security situation, has made it

difficult for the government to establish law and order and has undermined efforts to deliver development and public services.

The lack of consistent security continues to pose a significant barrier to socio-economic reforms, particularly those aimed at advancing women's rights and gender equality. In areas with active insurgent activity, women face heightened risks of violence, including targeted attacks and the imposition of restrictive laws by militant groups. The Taliban, both the TTP and the Afghan Taliban, have historically imposed strict interpretations of Islamic law, severely limiting women's freedoms, including their access to education, healthcare, and political participation (Parveen et al., 2016). Women in FATA already marginalized due to conservative social norms, face even greater exclusion and isolation in the context of ongoing militant violence. For example, the TTP has been responsible for numerous attacks on girls' schools and healthcare facilities, preventing women from accessing essential services (Shad & Ahmed, 2018).

In light of these challenges, the federal and provincial governments must prioritize security as part of their broader development agenda for the newly merged districts. Effective counterterrorism efforts must be complemented by strategies that build trust between local communities and state institutions, many of which have been distrusted due to years of neglect and military interventions. The continued threat of the TTP and other militant groups makes it essential to not only focus on counterinsurgency measures but also on creating a secure environment that fosters community engagement, gender equality, and the effective delivery of social services. The protection and advancement of women's rights in this context will require robust security measures alongside comprehensive social reforms that address the unique needs of women in conflict-affected areas (Ali, 2018).

3. Institutional Capacity

For the successful implementation of the merger, the KP provincial government must strengthen its administrative and institutional structures to manage the newly integrated areas. The integration of FATA into KP presents a complex challenge that requires effective governance, the proper allocation of resources, and the establishment of robust legal and administrative systems.

One of the key challenges is the lack of institutional capacity to manage the transition. The FATA region was historically governed by the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), which left little room for democratic participation or accountability. The merger necessitates the extension of KP's laws and governance structures to the newly formed districts, which is no small task. The provincial government must allocate significant financial and human resources to address the administrative vacuum that currently exists.

Furthermore, the integration of FATA into KP requires the development of local governance systems and the provision of public services that were previously neglected or poorly managed under the old system. Strengthening the rule of law, ensuring the delivery of basic services, and establishing local councils that are accountable to the people are crucial components of the merger's success.

The government must also focus on training and capacity-building within the local administration. The lack of professional expertise in governance and administration in these newly integrated areas will require ongoing support and training. Additionally, the challenge of providing equitable services to the remote and marginalized populations of FATA will require innovative solutions to ensure inclusivity and access to basic needs such as healthcare, education, and economic opportunities.

4. Political and Social Exclusion

Despite the merger offering the opportunity for greater political representation, a significant portion of FATA's population has historically been politically excluded. As mentioned, FATA's residents were not part of the broader political landscape of Pakistan for many years, and their engagement with the electoral system has been limited (Ali, 2018). Since the introduction of adult franchise in 1996, FATA residents have participated in elections, but their involvement has been marred by a lack of political awareness and a general sense of political disenfranchisement (Ullah & Hayat, 2018). Many people in the region remain unaware of their political rights due to a lack of education and political consciousness (Bangash, 2018). This has been exacerbated by the dominance of tribal elders, who often use their influence to control the political and social outcomes in the region (Khokhar et al., 2014). In some cases, political opportunists take advantage of the population's lack of awareness, manipulating them for political gain (Shad & Ahmed, 2018). The political exclusion of

FATA's residents has created a sense of deprivation, leading to frustration and unrest (Iqbal, 2016). Moreover, women in the region have historically been excluded from the political process. In many cases, women's rights to vote and participate in elections have been restricted by local customs and the authority of male family members (Khan, 2008). While the merger has provided women with new political opportunities, cultural resistance, and the dominance of male leaders continue to marginalize them from full participation in governance (Ullah et al., 2017). The sense of political exclusion in FATA has contributed to growing unrest and a sense of alienation among its people. The rise of ethnic and regional grievances in other parts of Pakistan, such as in Baluchistan and Southern Punjab, serves as a warning that unchecked political and social exclusion can lead to insurgency and violence (Ali, 2018). If the political leadership does not address the grievances of marginalized groups, including women, there is a risk of further fragmentation and destabilization within the country (Wakman, 1985).

Conclusion

The merger of FATA with KP presents both opportunities and challenges for the region's integration into Pakistan's broader governance and socio-economic systems. While the merger promises to bring legal, political, and social reforms, its success hinges on addressing multiple, complex issues, especially the entrenched security situation exacerbated by militant groups like the TTP and their impact on gender equality.

The region's persistent security challenges, primarily driven by the TTP and other extremist factions, remain a significant obstacle to the effective implementation of the merger. The TTP has long sought to undermine the integration process, viewing it as a threat to its control over FATA. The group's ongoing insurgency, alongside frequent attacks on state institutions and civilian targets, poses direct risks to the safety of women, in particular, whose public mobility and participation in societal roles are already restricted by conservative cultural norms. The TLP's hardline interpretation of Sharia law severely limits women's access to education, healthcare, and employment, while insurgent activities prevent the establishment of essential services and infrastructure (Shad & Ahmed, 2018; Parveen et al., 2016). The TTP's resistance to the central government also exacerbates gender-based violence, as militant groups frequently target women's rights activists and female leaders in their campaign to maintain patriarchal control.

Stabilizing the region's security situation is therefore critical to enabling broader socio-economic development and advancing gender equality. Military operations alone, such as those conducted under OP Zarb-e-Azb and OP Radd-ul-Fasaad, have not been enough to fully dismantle the insurgency or ensure the safety of vulnerable groups. A comprehensive strategy must focus not only on counterterrorism and law enforcement but also on rebuilding trust between local communities and state authorities. This includes addressing the root causes of militancy and offering long-term peace building efforts that ensure women's safety and participation in the reconstruction process.

In addition, cultural resistance to change remains a formidable challenge. While the legal reforms introduced by the merger, such as the extension of KP's laws on gender equality, provide a foundation for progress, the successful implementation of these laws requires a broader cultural shift. Public awareness campaigns, community-based education programs, and grassroots initiatives must engage both men and women in reshaping entrenched social norms that limit women's freedoms. Education, particularly for girls, must be a central focus. Despite improvements in legal protections, the literacy rate for women in FATA remains low, with significant barriers to access in rural areas. According to data from the PBS, the literacy rate for women in FATA was just 10.6% in 2017, compared to a national average of 46.4% (PBS, 2017). Closing this gender gap in education is essential for empowering women and ensuring they benefit from the opportunities that come with the merger.

Lastly, the institutional capacity of the provincial government must be strengthened to manage the integration effectively. This involves not only allocating sufficient resources but also ensuring that FATA's specific needs are addressed within the broader governance framework of KP. Effective governance is key to ensuring that services such as healthcare, education, and legal protection reach the most marginalized, including women. The lack of infrastructure and public services in FATA, compounded by security challenges, has left the region underdeveloped and socially isolated. Efforts to integrate FATA into the provincial economy and political structures must prioritize gender inclusivity and socio-economic parity.

While the merger of FATA with KP offers a path toward greater development, its success depends on addressing the complex security issues posed by groups like the TTP, fostering a cultural shift toward gender equality, and strengthening the provincial government's ability to manage the transition effectively. With targeted investments and comprehensive strategies that include gender-focused reforms, the merger could indeed lead to a more inclusive and prosperous future for the people of FATA and Pakistan as a whole.

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