

The Merger Paradox: Administrative Integration and the Stalled Economic Empowerment of Women in Tehsil Darra Adam Khel

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Abstract

This study investigates the merger of ex-EX-FATA and its impact on the economic empowerment of women conducted in Tehsil Sub Division Darra Adam Khel. On 31 May 2018, Pakistan's Parliament passed the 25th Constitutional Amendment, formally merging the Federally Administered Tribal Areas into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and ending more than seven decades of semi-autonomous governance under the Frontier Crimes Regulation. The reform was celebrated as a historic turning point that would extend constitutional rights, judicial protection, and development funds to a long-neglected borderland. This study examines a narrower but consequential question: has the legal integration of ex-EX-FATA translated into economic agency for women in Tehsil Darra Adam Khel, a sub-district historically defined by its illicit arms economy, military operations, and rigid Pashtunwali norms? Drawing on a qualitative case-study design, semi-structured interviews with fourteen working women from diverse sectors, and one focus group discussion, this research identifies mobility constraints, the persistence of localized patriarchy, financial exclusion, digital illiteracy, and a pronounced "policy paradox" in which post-merger state interventions remain symbolic rather than transformative. The findings are interpreted through Douglas North's New Institutionalism, which clarifies why formal legal change cannot, on its own, dislodge culturally embedded informal constraints. The study concludes that administrative integration is a necessary but insufficient condition for women's economic empowerment in Darra Adam Khel, and recommends place-based, culturally negotiated reforms.

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Introduction

The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (ex-EX-FATA) occupied a unique and historically marginal position within the Pakistani state. Spread across roughly 27,220 square kilometers along the porous Durand Line (Shad & Ahmad, 2018). The region was administered under the colonial-era Frontier Crimes Regulation for more than a century. It vested judicial authority in unelected Political Agents and tribal Maliks, suspended the bulk of Pakistan's constitutional protections (Dil, 2016). It produced what scholars have described as an "institutionalized subjugation" of tribal women, locked within the *chardewari* (four walls), denied inheritance,

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and treated as instruments in dispute settlements through practices such as *swara* and *vulvar* (Khan, 2012). On 31 May 2018, the EX-FATA Reforms Bill merged EX-FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa through the 25th Amendment, granting tribal residents full constitutional rights for the first time in more than seventy years and signaling the formal end of the FCR regime (International Crisis group, 2018). A ten-year development plan accompanied the merger, and a hundred-billion-rupee fund was allocated for the merged districts; however, no meaningful portion of this fund was earmarked for women-specific projects (Sulaiman & Bukhari, 2016). Tehsil Darra Adam Khel, located within the former Frontier Region Kohat on the Indus Highway sits at the intersection of three overlapping inheritances: a long-established illicit arms manufacturing economy, decades of militarization following 9/11, and an exceptionally conservative reading of Pakhtunwali that continues to govern women's mobility and economic participation (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

Despite the formal dissolution of the FCR and the rhetorical celebration of the 25th Amendment, a "Merger Paradox" persists in Darra Adam Khel. Legal integration has not produced proportional gains in women's economic agency. Women constitute roughly half of the population yet remain largely outside the formal labor market and unemployed. This research investigates the specific challenges that shape working women's economic participation in Tehsil Darra Adam Khel in the post-merger period: mobility constraints, workplace patriarchy, financial exclusion, digital illiteracy, and the perception of state policy as symbolic and ineffective.

Darra Adam Khel offers a uniquely instructive case study for three reasons. First, its historical association with the Darra Adam Khel arms bazaar makes it one of the most militarized and surveilled tribal pockets in Pakistan, a context in which women's rights questions are bound up with broader security politics. Second, the region embodies the sharpest possible collision between formal state law (the 25th Amendment) and the informal yet powerful code of Pakhtunwali, including *ghairat*, *purdah*, *swara*, and *ghag* that structure women's everyday decisions about education, employment, and mobility. Third, by focusing on a single sub-district, the study aims to generate the kind of fine-grained, gender-disaggregated evidence that is conspicuously absent from national-level policy discussions. The result has direct relevance for evidence-based policymaking in the merged districts, for comparative scholarship on post-conflict gender and governance, and for local organizations seeking to design culturally viable empowerment programs.

Literature

Governance and Gender in Tribal Societies

A substantial body of scholarship documents how the FCR functioned as both a governance framework and an instrument of gender-based exclusion. Dil (2016) argues that the FCR was widely condemned as draconian, un-Islamic, and unlawful because of its suppression of fundamental rights and civil liberties in the tribal belt. Mumtaz (2016) adds that the FCR failed to address critical social issues such as early marriages, honor killings, bride price, and forced marriages, and its legitimacy was eventually compromised by its

inability to provide protective frameworks for women's rights. Khan (2012) foundational study in Kurram showed that under the FCR regime, women were treated as property, denied inheritance, excluded from business, and lacked access to forums in which to advocate on their own behalf. In specific Khan & Afridi (2010) notes that tribal codes such as the Turizona of the Turi tribe, women's worth was even recorded in *Nurkhnama* wedding-price ledgers, a practice that reduced women to monetary units with no independent legal standing. These legacies are not abstract historiography; they continue to shape how male jirga members and Malik leaders perceive the proper bounds of women's economic activity in post-merger Darra Adam Khel.

Post-Conflict/Post-Merger Development Paradigms

Pakistan's experience in the merged districts is not unique. International literature on post-conflict transitions offers instructive parallels. In Rwanda, the 1994 genocide produced a demographic shock that simultaneously created new economic responsibilities for women and entrenched survivors in traditional gender roles; widows were pushed into paid work, while married and unmarried women often retreated into conformity with conventional female ideals as a strategy to secure remarriage (Schindler, 2011). What is striking about Rwanda is the deliberate post-1994 policy of placing gender equality at the center of legal and constitutional reconstruction. Rwanda's 2003 Constitution reserved 30 percent of posts in decision-making bodies for women, and subsequent scholarship shows that, where agency, structure, and power relations change together, women's economic empowerment becomes a transformational force for social justice (Niyonkuru & Barrett, 2021; Rugamba & Njenga, 2023). Northern Ireland offers a different, more cautionary parallel. Despite the 1998 Belfast Agreement, women in post-conflict Northern Ireland remain disproportionately affected by Brexit-related funding losses and by specific patterns of violence, with the third sector that historically supported women heavily dependent on EU structural funds (McAreavey et al., 2025). Both cases underscore North's earlier insight that economies adopting the formal rules of another political system will exhibit very different performance because of differing informal norms and enforcement characteristics (Chavance, 2008). In other words, importing the formal apparatus of KP provincial governance into a tribal setting cannot by itself generate the kind of social transformation that accompanied Rwanda's gender reforms.

The 25th Amendment: Aspirations vs. Legal Frameworks

The 25th Amendment extended to the merged districts the full body of Pakistani constitutional law, the Pakistan Penal Code, the Protection of Women against Violence Act, workplace harassment statutes, and provincial labor protection (International Crisis Group, 2018). The federal cabinet moved to support the merger after a 2016 KP Assembly resolution and formal passage followed in May 2018. Subsequent legislation, such as the KP Women Property Rights Act, promised robust enforcement of inheritance and property claims (Mehmood & Mir, 2019). However, scholars and field reports demonstrate that legal promise has not translated into legal practice. Crisis Group (2022) notes that despite repeated accusations of abuse, no convictions have been recorded under the KP Women Property

Rights Act and the reforms remain, in their language, "only on paper". Even the symbolic inclusion of women in formal electoral politics has been weak: in the first general election after the merger, only 20 percent of women voted, primarily because of missing women-only polling stations, safety concerns, and transport difficulties (FAFEN, 2019).

Identifying the Research Gap

Although macro-level analyses of the EX-FATA merger are abundant, there is a striking shortage of localized, gender-disaggregated, sub-district-level data on women's economic participation. National reports quantify the regional gender gap in education and aggregate employment statistics. Yet how women themselves experience the merger, what they identify as their greatest constraints, and how they perceive state interventions is rarely documented. This research responds to that gap by foregrounding the voices of fourteen working women and one focus group in Darra Adam Khel, providing the qualitative texture that macroeconomic indicators cannot capture.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

New Institutionalism

This study is anchored in Douglass North's New Institutionalism, which holds that institutions are the humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic, and social interaction, and which distinguishes sharply between formal rules (constitutions, statutes, property rights) and informal constraints (sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions, and codes of conduct) (Chavance, 2008). North's central insight for the case of Darra Adam Khel is that "informal constraints that are culturally derived will not change immediately in reaction to changes in the formal rules" (Chavance, 2008). This produces what he describes as a tension between altered formal rules and persisting informal constraints (Chavance, 2008). Applied to the merger, this means that the 25th Amendment, the KP Women Property Rights Act, and anti-harassment legislation are formal rule changes, whereas *ghairat*, *pardah*, Malik authority, *jirga* verdicts, and the inheritance denial embedded in tribal custom are informal constraints that operate with their own enforcement machinery. Eggertsson underscores that policy makers can directly influence formal institutions but informal ones "are much less tangible and usually fall outside the direct influence of public policy" (Eggertsson, 1997). Goldschmidt et al. add that formal institutions can either complement or undermine informal ones, but the more durable anchor in any society remains its cultural inheritance (Goldschmidt et al., 2006). Reading Darra Adam Khel through this lens allows us to see why the merger is celebrated in legislative drafts but contested in household courtyards.

The "Implementation Gap" in Policy

Complementing North, this study draws on the top-down versus bottom-up distinction in implementation theory. Top-down models, characteristic of administrative reforms like the merger, begin with a central decision (the 25th Amendment), elaborate statutes and departmental circulars, and assume rational implementation by field-level actors. Bottom-up

models begin with the street-level bureaucrat, the local elder, and the household, and ask whether the formal policy corresponds to the incentives, beliefs, and capacities of those who must execute it. The merger can be read as a textbook top-down intervention: KP's Chief Minister, federal ministries, and donor partners designed a package of post-merger programs that traveled down the administrative hierarchy to a sub-district whose informal institutions are poorly understood by those who designed the package. The persistent gap between Peshawar-approved schemes and Darra Adam Khel realities, in which 83 percent of female vocational trainees were reportedly barred from attending courses by male guardians (KP Women's Directorate, 2021), and the KP Women Property Rights Act produced no convictions, exemplifies precisely what implementation theory predicts when a top-down reform meets an unprepared or uncooperative local substrate.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative case-study design, with Tehsil Darra Adam Khel as the unit of analysis. The case-study approach is well-suited to a research problem that asks "how" and "why" women experience particular challenges in a real-life, naturally bounded setting, and that prioritizes depth over generalizability. The research proceeded in three phases: framing the problem, primary data collection through semi-structured interviews and one focus group discussion, and thematic analysis of the resulting transcripts.

The primary data collection instruments were a semi-structured interview schedule and a focus group discussion guide. The interview schedule comprised ten open-ended questions designed to provide the researcher and respondent a flexible, non-filtered space in which to discuss the field and off-field challenges faced by working women. Open-ended questions allow the researcher to re-engage participants who misunderstand a question and to surface the unorganized yet revealing testimony typical of home-based and agricultural workers. The FGD was conducted with six women at Darra Adam Khel Degree College and served to validate and triangulate interview findings by surfacing community-level consensus and dissent.

A targeted, purposive sampling technique was used to select respondents from different professions and villages within the sub-district. The final sample consisted of 14 respondents, purposefully drawn to capture diverse employment settings: four government teachers (one SST, one CT, one lecturer, one PST), one female doctor at the Tehsil Headquarter Hospital, one nurse at the same facility, five home-based entrepreneurs, one junior executive, and one agricultural worker. This heterogeneity allowed the researcher to compare how state-employed, private-sector, and informal-sector women differentially experience the same post-merger environment.

The study is guided by a central research question: What are the principal challenges that continue to constrain the economic participation of working women in Tehsil Darra Adam Khel in the post-2018 merger period?

The corresponding objectives are: to identify the practical, cultural, and structural barriers that working women encounter in accessing economic opportunities; to evaluate whether and how the 25th Amendment and related post-merger interventions have translated into tangible gains for women; to examine the gap between formal legal reforms and their operational implementation on the ground; and to propose evidence-based, contextually appropriate recommendations for women's economic empowerment in the sub-district

Given that Darra Adam Khel is a sensitive security environment with a long history of military operations and arms manufacturing, particular care was taken to protect informants. Interviews were audio-recorded only with informed consent, transcripts were anonymized, and direct identifiers were stripped from quotations. The researcher also acknowledged positionality, recognizing that her own background as a local working woman might shape interpretation, and mitigated this risk by using a standardized schedule and analysis procedure. Two methodological limitations must be flagged: the convenience sample, while diverse, cannot claim statistical representativeness, and the security environment constrained access to certain villages and informants, restricting the geographical spread of the sample.

The Case of Darra Adam Khel: Contextualizing the Ground Reality

Socio-Economic Profile

Tehsil Darra Adam Khel sits along the Indus Highway in what was formerly Frontier Region Kohat. Its economy has historically revolved around three pillars: the manufacturing and sale of small arms (the Darra arms bazaar remains one of South Asia's most long-standing illegal arms markets), trade and transport along the Indus Highway corridor, and subsistence agriculture, limited by the rugged terrain of the surrounding hills (PBS, 2023). Women's participation in this economy has been sharply gendered. Where women appear in the formal economy at all, they are concentrated in teaching and healthcare, sectors that are read as extensions of the domestic and caregiving role rather than as legitimate careers. Where they appear in the informal economy, they work in agriculture, livestock, and home-based piecework, frequently unpaid and rarely recognized as economically productive labor (Khan & Rahat, 2020). The persistent interlocking of the arms economy and conservative tribal patriarchy makes Darra Adam Khel distinct from, and arguably more challenging than, urban centers like Peshawar, where women are more visible in formal employment.

Pre-Merger vs. Post-Merger Governance

Before 2018, Darra Adam Khel was administered under the FCR through a system of Political Agents and tribal Maliks, in which unelected customary leaders wielded extensive judicial and revenue authority. The 25th Amendment replaced this with the regular KP provincial apparatus: the KP Police, the district judiciary, and the local government system.

Yet, as interview participants repeatedly noted, the visible change in administration has not displaced the actual locus of power. One respondent summarized the transition bluntly: "The merger promised us justice and development. But nothing has changed for women. The people who hold the power are still the same. The Political agents are gone, but the Malik (tribal chiefs) and their Jirgas persist and still decide everything". Malik and Asrar (2019) similarly observe that tribal traditions did not dissolve after the merger but evolved; male jirgas have effectively integrated themselves into formal court processes, particularly in civil and criminal matters. The committee's own suggestion was that local jirgas should continue to function as a jury system, an arrangement that preserves customary authority under a judicial covering.

Cultural Landscape

The cultural landscape of Darra Adam Khel is governed by a strict and internally enforced reading of Pakhtunwali. Sethna (2017) describes Pashtunwali as the traditional code of honor that reinforces patriarchal authority through practices such as *ghag*, *miratah*, and *sharmila*, with additional practices of dowry, *ghairat*, and *swara* further undermining women's status, all in tension with both Islamic injunctions and Pakistan's international commitments. Sanauddin (2015) adds that within the KP province, the notion of women as carriers of family honor is particularly intense, and men go to considerable lengths to protect it by restricting women's movement. In Darra Adam Khel specifically, the practical expression of *ghairat* and *purdah* takes three forms: restrictions on independent mobility, restrictions on women's interaction with non-mahram males, and restrictions on the spatial reach of women's economic activity to a narrow set of "respectable" sectors. The implications for economic participation are profound: a husband might bar a wife from attending an IT course, as one government college teacher recounted, or prevent her from operating a smartphone with internet, as another participant described, even when these choices would directly increase household income.

Analysis and Findings

Perceived Impact of the Merger on Economic Agency

The qualitative data does not support the hypothesis that the merger has produced a meaningful expansion of women's economic agency in Darra Adam Khel. Across the interviews and FGD, participants described a "paper reform," not a felt transformation. Visibility of women's rights in legal documents was not matched by visibility of women in markets, courts, or offices. One respondent captured the paradox in stark terms: "The merger promised us justice and development. But nothing has changed for women" (Participant 10, Interview). Where participants did perceive change, they identified two small openings: a marginal decline in absolute coercion by Political Agents and the symbolic possibility, exemplified in Naheed Afridi's candidacy in Khyber district, of women contesting elections on party tickets (Nation, 2019). But symbolic openings were undercut by the operational reality: missing women-only polling stations, transport obstacles, and the unanimity of traditional jirga councils in excluding women from deliberative processes. The merger, in short, has legalized women; it has not yet *legalized* their economic agency.

Structural Barriers: Infrastructure and Credit

Two interlocking structural barriers dominate the data: physical and infrastructural exclusion, and financial exclusion. Mobility was identified by participants as the most fundamental barrier, the foundation upon which all other obstacles are layered. Safe, reliable, women-friendly transport is simply not present in the sub-district. Field data from a parallel study in Nowshehra district shows the broader pattern: 41 percent of women cited transport as a serious problem, while 91 percent identified domestic burdens, childcare responsibilities, and rigid social expectations as part of the same mobility complex (Aman, Naz, & Dilzak, 2023). For Darra Adam Khel women, mobility barriers operate on three levels: infrastructural (no safe transport), social (pervasive social pressure against women's independent movement), and legal-cultural (customary restrictions layered on top of constitutional rights). The financial dimension of structural exclusion is equally stark. Inheritance denial is widespread, leaving women without the land, housing, or agricultural assets required for formal-sector engagement (Participant 10, Interview). Working women rely on cash-only transactions and, when capital is short, on pawning personal jewelry (Participant 9, Interview). One participant summarized the generational lag with a bitter metaphor: "The world is moving forward towards digital currency and we are left behind still counting coins in our purses" (Participant 4, Interview).

Digital exclusion compounds both problems: women cannot apply online for government programs, do not have access to e-commerce platforms, and are trained in stitching and embroidery rather than in the digital, financial, and IT skills that command modern wages.

The Policy Paradox: "Weak and Ineffective" Interventions

The most analytically generative finding is the policy paradox, the systematic perception among participants that post-merger state interventions are weak and ineffective. Three sub-findings emerged. First, is welfare dependency. A nuanced analysis drawn in the National Report on the Status of Women in Pakistan (2023) showed that "BISP's intervention reduced chronic poverty, shifting them to the 'vulnerable' and 'quasi-non-poor' categories. However, the intervention is not sufficient to take out poor women from poverty. The majority of them still fall into poor and vulnerable categories, and any negative shock may push them back into extreme poverty." Programs like BISP were widely criticized for extending a few thousand rupees after long queues and complex paperwork, rather than investing in skill training, transport, or job creation. One respondent commented: "The government is very efficient in extending programs like BISP that makes women dependent on few thousand rupees. But the government will not extend programs that would actually make a change in the day to day life of women like reliable public transport for women, vocational training with job placements, or enforcement of laws to protect rights of women" (Participant 3, Interview).

Second, legislative failure. Although the KP Women Property Rights Act mandates conviction for rights violations, no convictions have been recorded under the law despite repeated accusations of abuse, a textbook case of "law on the books" without law in practice. Post-merger, 83 percent of female vocational trainees were barred from attending courses by

male guardians, an unmistakable signal that informal constraints continue to override formal opportunities (KP Women's Directorate, 2021). Third, is institutional neglect and the "outsider" nature of KP administrative officials. Participants noted that KP-appointed officers arriving in the sub-district after the merger lacked cultural familiarity, did not speak Pashto with the local dialect fluency expected by elders, and did not mobilize existing tribal networks (such as jirgas) in ways that could have created openings for women. The merger was experienced as a Peshawar-imposed rather than a Darra-owned transition, which diluted local buy-in and reinforced a sense in which the policy was read as outside, and largely irrelevant to, women's daily struggles.

The Persistence of Localized Patriarchy

The qualitative finding shows that underneath all three policy paradoxes is the persistence of a deeply entrenched, localized patriarchal order that has selectively bypassed the new legal system. Patriarchy expresses itself as a boundary-drawing exercise that defines what work is "permissible" and "respectable" for women. Teaching and healthcare are tolerated because they are read as extensions of domestic caregiving; IT, business ownership, agricultural entrepreneurship, and any role involving mobility and interaction with non-mahram males are regulated or forbidden. Women who challenge this order face severe backlash, from marital disapproval to social ostracism, while women who comply are denied the breadth of skills and experience needed for autonomous entrepreneurship.

The resilience of patriarchy in the post-merger period is reinforced by a particular kind of post-conflict trauma. Decades of militarization, displacement, and securitization following 9/11 have left the population in a state of heightened suspicion toward any innovation that disrupts familiar hierarchies, particularly one that promotes women's economic autonomy (Hussain & Baeoming, 2021).

The result is that even when state programs are nominally available, the cultural gatekeeping of male relatives, jirga leaders, and Malik gatekeepers operates as an invisible veto, channeling women's ambitions into a narrow and poorly remunerated set of "respectable" activities.

Discussion and Policy Recommendations

Reconciling Policy with Ground Reality

The findings point unambiguously to the conclusion that administrative integration is not a substitute for social and economic inclusion.

The 25th Amendment succeeded in its narrow constitutional task: EX-FATA residents, including women, now enjoy the full protections of Pakistani law. What it failed to do was loosen the informal constraints that mediate the actual exercise of those rights. North's framework predicts this outcome with precision; formal rules can be redesigned but informal

constraints, often inherited culturally over centuries, change slowly and unevenly (Chavance, 2008; Eggertsson, 1997; Goldschmidt et al., 2006).

The implementation literature adds that top-down reforms, especially those designed in provincial capitals with limited local input, tend to falter at the point of contact with the gatekeepers who control household decisions, jirga verdicts, and local hiring. Reading the data through both lenses, the merger is not a failure but rather an incomplete first stage. The next stage must deliberately engage with informal institutions rather than legislating around them. Rwanda's experience suggests that this is technically possible. There, post-1994 governments placed gender reform centrally in reconstruction; women entered parliament and the labor market because the state simultaneously changed the formal rules, the enforcement infrastructure, and the cultural narrative (Niyonkuru & Barrett, 2021; Schindler, 2011). Darra Adam Khel needs a similarly coordinated, multi-layered intervention rather than a sequence of independent departmental schemes.

Evidence-Based Policy Recommendations

The participants' testimonies and the analytical framework together generate four specific recommendations.

First, *decentralize economic empowerment programs to the sub-district level*. National and provincial schemes are filtered through administrative layers whose staff do not speak local dialects, do not know Malik families, and do not understand how tribal gatekeepers operate. Women-only desks should be established in every Tehsil administration building in the tribal merged districts, staffed by women fluent in local languages and recruited from within the merged districts themselves. These desks would administer small-business grants, inheritance-claim assistance, and transport-voucher schemes directly, without first-pass filtering through provincial departments.

Second, *establish women-only marketplaces in Darra Adam Khel*. Darra Adam Khel's most distinctive economic feature, the arms bazaar, has excluded women for generations; building a parallel structure of women-only commercial spaces would symbolically and economically invert this exclusion. These bazaars should be concretely planned as secure compounds with female shopkeepers, female-managing committees, on-site banking correspondents, and a dedicated van service connecting them to surrounding villages. By concentrating women's commerce in a single, surveilled, culturally navigable space, the marketplace solves the mobility barrier and the financial exclusion barrier simultaneously.

Third, *integrate traditional leadership into gender-sensitization dialogues*. Malik and Asrar (2019) caution that eliminating the jirga would be unfeasible and would generate severe backlash, given the jirga's deep historical and cultural foundations. Rather than abolish or bypass the jirga, the policy should convert it, at least partially, into a partner. A Sub-District Gender Jirga Forum, comprising elected women representatives, two or three reform-oriented Maliks, provincial government nominees, and donor-facilitated gender experts, would meet quarterly in Darra Adam Khel to review women's economic grievances, mediate inheritance

and property disputes, and recommend local-level rule changes. This approach works *with* the informal institution rather than against it, the very move North's framework suggests is necessary for durable change.

Fourth, *incentivize the informal cottage industry where women are already active*. Rather than pushing women into unfamiliar male-dominated sectors, policy should meet them where they already operate: home-based embroidery, poultry, dairy, and food-processing. Tax exemptions, low-interest women-only microfinance lines, and recognition of cottage-industry work as legitimate employment for purposes of inheritance and divorce settlements would create an immediate, low-friction expansion of women's economic autonomy. Importantly, vocational training in this sector must be re-engineered to include digital literacy (basic smartphone use, e-commerce, mobile banking, social media marketing) so that informal sector women are not permanently locked out of the modernizing economy. Training hubs should combine traditional skills (preserved for cultural legitimacy) with digital skills (necessary for economic upgrading), and they must be located within Darra Adam Khel itself rather than in Peshawar.

Beyond these four corner recommendations, two cross-cutting measures are essential. One, gender-based infrastructure: specifically, *women-only vans* operating on the Indus Highway corridor with female drivers and conductors, addressing the 41 percent transport complaint registered in similar rural KP contexts. Two, is legal-aid clinics staffed by female lawyers from within the merged districts, providing free counsel on inheritance and harassment, and explicitly tracking cases under the KP Women Property Rights Act to break the zero-conviction logjam documented in post-merger reports.

Conclusion

This research has argued that the legal integration of EX-FATA into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, while constitutionally significant and genuinely welcomed by tribal communities and intellectuals, has not produced a proportional improvement in the economic agency of women in Tehsil Darra Adam Khel. Five challenges structure the daily reality of working women in the sub-district: a mobility crisis rooted in infrastructural and cultural exclusion, a workplace patriarchy that confines women to a narrow sector of "respectable" employment, a systemic financial exclusion involving inheritance denial and dependence on pawning, a digital illiteracy that locks women out of the modern economy, and a policy paradox in which state interventions are widely perceived as weak, symbolic, and ineffective. Through the theoretical lens of New Institutionalism, these challenges are not anomalies but predictable outcomes of a formal-rule change running into informal constraints that have remained culturally intact ([Chavance, 2008](#); [Eggertsson, 1997](#)).

The 25th Amendment has rightly been described as a historic turning point, but for women in Darra Adam Khel, the turning has not yet arrived. The implication for policymakers and researchers is twofold. First, the merger must be understood as a *beginning* rather than an end: the constitutional scaffold is in place, but the operational and cultural scaffolding of women's economic participation still needs to be built, and it must be constructed in

cooperation with the very informal institutions the merger does not reach. Second, longitudinal research is urgently needed. The present study captures a single moment, roughly seven years into the post-merger period. Whether decentralized bazaars, integrating Jirgas, women-only transport, and gender-reskilling programs produce durable change over five- and ten-year horizons must be tracked carefully, with gender-disaggregated indicators that capture not only participation rates but also earnings retention, inheritance recovery, and mobility autonomy. Such longitudinal studies will not only refine the policy agenda for Darra Adam Khel; they will also extend the comparative literature on post-conflict gender transitions, an area in which the Pakistani case offers lessons that travel well beyond the merged-district borders.

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