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Students' Engagement with NGOs or CBOs, and its impact on students Political Participation and Activism in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The current study attempts to investigate the role of engagement of university students with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) on the political participation and activism of university students in the Pakistani context. Employing quantitative research design, data were collected from a sample of 191 students drawn from both public and private universities using structured questionnaire. The results reveal a strong positive relationship between engagement with NGOs/CBOs and the extent of political participation and activism of students. Participants who participated in these organizations showed greater interest in politics and had higher frequency of participation in political activities. The results highlight the role of NGOs/CBOs in the political socialization and empowerment of students, and throws light on the necessity of reinforcing such initiatives in order to strengthen the democratic participation in Pakistan.



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Introduction

Within the context of the modern socio-political climate, with its civic warfare, digital activism, and growing demands for participatory governance, an interesting paradox remains. Despite young people making up over half of the world population their participation in formal political structures remains significantly underrepresented (Nations, 2012). This underrepresentation is especially salient in Pakistan which has around 64% population under age of thirty (Ahmad, 2018; Ali, 2023). Even with this demographic advantage, levels of political participation, activism, and citizenship among young people are disproportionately low (Frasure & Williams, 2009; Ramakrishnan & Baldassare, 2004).

In view of this democratic deficit, Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have emerged as influencers in promoting youth participation in a wide range of dimensions. Their contribution is to mobilize communities, inhibiting the extent of inclusion and generating participatory opportunities for marginalized or underrepresented groups (Benn et al., 2014; Bessant, 2004; Putnam, 2000). These institutions are venues for an alternative basis of civic engagement which help young citizens develop their leadership capacity, promote civic responsibility, and engage in political dialogue in a civic context at the grass-roots level (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013; McFarland & Thomas, 2006).

Empirical evidence indicates that youth engaged with NGOs have a higher level of political interest and knowledge and are more politically active, especially when they cannot access or trust formal political structures (Zukin et al., 2006; Bessant, 2004; Putnam, 2000). Studies conducted by Youniss et al., in 2002, Sherrod et al., in 2010 and Torney-Purta et al., in 2001 testify to the robustness of civic volunteerism and organizational participation as predictors of youth democratic engagement. Likewise, studies have been done in Pakistan that show an increased level of political awareness among the students of universities who are associated with the civil society organizations: they have a higher tendency of engaging in politics in terms of talking and participating in political activities (Jahan, 2021;

Khan et al., 2021; Ullah & Malik, 2021). Ahmed et al., (2021) further reported that students' participation in local community projects is a significant predictor of student involvement in protests, attendance in awareness sessions on and expression in political views on social media.

NGOs and CBOs do more than promote activism; they bring about the acquisition of political knowledge. Through the conduct of civic training, awareness sessions and public forums, they expose the students to democratic principles and the political processes and thus improving their understanding of issues related to governance and citizenship. Political knowledge forms the foundation of cognitive knowledge for informed participation so that the citizens can interpret the political events, evaluate political policies and make rational decisions within the framework of a democratic society (Carpini and Keeter, 1996). Consequently, interaction with NGOs and CBOs encourage participation and at the same time provide the students with necessary knowledge for substantive political participation.

In Pakistan where, institutional trust is low and youth participation in formal politics is low, NGOs and CBOs fill an important niche by offering young people practical spaces of civic learning and participatory experience. Their activities to mobilize students for community development, human rights advocacy and policy dialogue have built a nascent culture of activism and civic responsibility among educated youth.

The present study therefore examines the effect of student's engagement in NGOs and CBOs on their political participation and activism. It further examines the link between such engagement and political involvement, and measures whether there are demographic shapes such as gender in the relationship. By addressing these questions, the research seeks to develop understandings about civil society engagement as a catalyst of informed and active citizenship among university students in Pakistan.

In light of these considerations, the study is guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To analyze the impact of the engagement with NGO/CBOs on political participation and activism.
2. To examine the link between participation with

NGOs/CBOs and political participation and activism.

3. To understand whether there exist gender-based differences in engagement with NGOs/CBOs and political participation and activism.

Literature Review

The concept of youth engagement has received a large amount of scholarly and policy attention. Youth constitutes a key segment of society, whose participation in civic and political activities guarantees the effectiveness of democratic processes. Stimulation with NGOs and CBOs helps become a channel between citizens and the political system fostering participation, political learning, and raising communities.

Engagement with NGOs and CBOs

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) have played a key role in promoting democratic participation and civic empowerment. They are seen as an important instrument of social change, mobilising individuals, encouraging participation and consciousness in relation to political and social problems. NGOs and CBOs mobilise the people, organise campaigns and facilitate youth in community based activities. They contribute to the development of leadership skills, increase political learning, and offer opportunities for civic education.

Researchers such as Putnam (2000), Bessant (2004), and Benn et al. (2014) spoke to the role that civil society organisations play in achieving participation, in particular for historically underrepresented groups. McFarland and Thomas (2006) emphasised that NGOs and CBOs are alternative spaces for civic learning, where students gain leadership capacity, political responsibility and social trust. Youniss et al. (2002) and Sherrod et al. (2010) showed that civic volunteerism and organisational participation are important predictors of participation in the democratic processes by youth.

In the Pakistani context, the NGOs and CBOs give the youth an opportunity to get involved with civic life through awareness campaigns, policy debates and development programmes. Ahmed et al. (2021) found that student participation in local community projects predicted considerably

student participation in protesting, student attendance at local awareness sessions, and political opinion expression via social media. These results support the idea that participation with NGOs and CBOs promotes political and civic participation.

Political Participation and Activism

Political participation is a multidimensional concept which includes both conventional and non-conventional forms of participation. It involves all forms of activity through which citizens participate in the political process, such as voting and discussion, demonstrations, and digital activism. Political activism, which is an extension of participation, refers to actions that aim to promote or resist social or political change.

Verba et al (1995) stated that political participation is the keystone of democracy and made known that the active involvement of citizens is necessary to ensure the accountability and representation of citizens. Dalton (2008) and Ekman & Amna (2012) went further to differentiate between traditional participation, such as voting, and newer forms of participation such as social media activism and protest.

In Pakistan, political participation by students has been rather low in the face of suspension of student unions and institutional constraints. Nevertheless, alternative forums available in NGOs and CBOs have facilitated civic and political activities for the youth. Studies conducted by Jahan (2021), Khan et al. (2021), and Ullah and Malik (2021) prove that the political interest, awareness and activism of students who work with NGOs and CBOs are higher compared to students who do not. Their involvement helps to acquire political knowledge, boosts their confidence and motivates participation in public affairs.

Empirical findings from Ahmed et al. (2021) shows a tight connection between participation in community projects and higher involvement in protests, political discussions and advocacy campaigns. These forms of engagement reflect the recent rising trend in youth activism that stems from involvement in civil society (Farid & Ashraf, 2025).

The literature also brings out the fact that the patterns of engagement and participation differ according to gender as male and female often

differ in level of engagement and activism. In the light of these findings the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: There is a significant positive impact of student's engagement with the NGOs and CBOs on political participation and activism.

H2: There is a significant relationship between engagement with NGOs and CBOs and political participation and activism.

H3: There is significant difference between the male and female students in their level of engagement with NGOs and CBOs.

H4: There is a significant difference between the male and female in terms of student's political participation and activism level.

The review of extant literature shows that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) contribute largely to the political behavior of a youth by developing youth's civic engagement, leadership abilities, and democratic awareness. These institutions provide alternative arenas for learning, for socialization, and for political participation, especially in a context where formal political structures are limited or unable. Consistent with the Civic Voluntarism Model (Verba et al., 1995), participation in such organizations helps to solidify the understanding of democratic values, helps to increase the confidence to engage in civic issues and develops the ability to influence decision-making processes. Consequently, the participation of NGOs and CBOs leads to development of an informed and active citizenry which tends to support the democratic development of the nation. Nonetheless, empirical research in Pakistan exploring a quantitative relationship in this regard among University students is still scarce. This study hence examines the effects of involvement with NGOs and CBOs on political participation and activism, paying special attention to differences in relation to gender.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative survey research design to examine the influence of student involvement with NGOs and CBOs on political

participation and activism. This design aligns with common practices in civic and political development research that use quantitative, often survey-based (Bekkers, 2005; Checkoway, 2012; Hooghe & Stolle, 2004; Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; Quintelier, 2007; Verba et al., 1995; Zukin et al., 2006).

Study Participants

The population of the study was university students of public and private universities of Pakistan. Participants were recruited from a range of different fields of study in order to have variability in educational background and exposure to political and civic activities.

Sampling Technique

A stratified random sampling method was employed which was believed to be suitable in the study of specific attributes in a defined population (Etikan et al., 2016; Patton, 2015). A representative sample of 191 students was identified for total response; representation was made between provinces, genders, and types of institutions.

Ethical Consideration

The study followed ethical norms that are standard in social science research that involves human subjects. Participation was entirely voluntary with students provided information concerning the purpose of the study and assurances about confidentiality. The questionnaire began with an informed consent statement in accordance with the recommendations of Bryman (2016) and Israel & Hy (2006). No personal data was collected at all; everything they responded about was for academic use.

Instrument

A structured questionnaire was used as the primary instrument for data collection. The questionnaire comprised three main sections: demographic information, engagement with NGOs and CBOs (independent variable); and political participation and activism (dependent variables). Sperber & McClendon, (2022) and modified common measures related to youth civic engagement and political behavior (Tufekci, 2014; Zaheer, 2016). Participants were asked to respond to all items in the questionnaire using a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree),

representing different degrees of endorsement. Before final administration, the questionnaire was also pretested on a sample of university students to guarantee clarity, relevance and comprehensibility (Dillman et al., 2014).

Data Collection Procedure

The information was obtained in a print and online process in order to facilitate accessibility. Among the 191 responses, 73 were in the form of hard copies disseminated at university campuses and student events, and 118 were in the form of an online Google Form circulated by emails, WhatsApp groups and personal networks. This mixed-mode approach allowed for the representation of respondents from various

academic disciplines and provinces. Responses were filtered for completeness and consistency after being collected.

Reliability and Validity of the Instrument

Cronbach's Alpha, which was used to test the reliability of the questionnaire, showed that constructs had high internal consistency. Values ranged from .886 to .936, exceeding a minimum acceptable reliability of .70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), suggesting that the items consistently measured the intended concepts. The high reliability scores confirmed that the instrument was reliably generated and valid for assessing the impact of NGO/CBO involvement on students' political behaviors.

Table 1: Reliability of the Instrument

Variable Name	Total Items	Construct-wise Cronbach's Alpha Value
Engagement with NGOs & CBOs	10	.936
Political Participation and Activism	10	.887

Data Analysis and Results

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

The sample of the study included 191 participants from different universities in Pakistan. 121 female and 70 male students. 86.4 % of the participants were pursuing a BS degree, 12 percent were in M.Phil., and only 1.6 % were in PhD programs. Mostly the respondents belong to the age of 18-22 years. Students belong to Private and Public universities, including Punjab University Lahore, Government College University Lahore, University of Education, Quaid-e-Azam University, University of Lahore, University of Faisalabad, Kinnaird College for Women University, Superior University, University of Malakand, Women's University Swabi and University of Swat. Mostly (n = 161) students were engaged in the public universities. Given their economic background, most of the respondents indicated that they belonged to middle-income families (48.2%). The majority of the students were non-participants of political activities in their families, with (n = 136), 3.1 % belonging to a very politically active family. The geographical area in which the sample was largely referred to was Punjab, with 83.8% of the students

referring to it as their province of origin. Other regions included participants in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (9.4%), Gilgit-Baltistan (3.7%), Balochistan (1.6%), Sindh (1.0%) and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (0.5%). Lastly, 19.9 of the students answered that they were involved in an NGOs or CBOs (n = 38), in organizations such as Alkhidmat Foundation, Akhuwat, Echo for Equity, Saroon Pakistan, Allah Waly Trust, Learners Nexus, Junnat ul Firdos Trust, as well as others that were members of a community-based organization, whereas 80.1 % of the students (n = 153) stated that they were not engaged at present in any NGO or CBO (Ahmed et al., 2021).

Table 2: Students' Demographic Data (N=191)

Demographic Information	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	70	36.6
Female	121	63.4
Age		
18-22	129	67.5
23-27	52	27.2
28-32	3	1.6
Above 33	7	3.7
Education Level		
BS	165	86.4
M. Phil	23	12
PHD	3	1.6
Type of University		
Private	30	15.7
Public	161	84.3
Family Socioeconomic Status		
Lower-income (Less than 50k)	28	14.7
Middle-income (50k to 1 lac)	92	48.2
Upper-income (Above 1 lac)	71	37.2
Family Political Background		
No involvement in politics	136	71.2
Some family members are involved in politics	49	25.7
Highly politically active family	6	3.1
Province of Origin		
Punjab	160	83.8
Sindh	2	1
KPK	18	9.4
Balochistan	3	1.6
GB	7	3.7
AJ&K	1	.5
Involvement in any NGO or CBO?		
Yes	38	19.9
No	153	80.1

Engagement with NGOs and CBOs

Data on students' perspectives on engaging with NGOs and CBOs in Table 3 indicate that the students were largely in agreement with statements that underscored the developmental

role of these entities. For instance, they agreed that NGOs and CBOs offer learning experiences and opportunities for youth to develop new skills significantly ($\mu = 3.59$) and provide resources and support ($\mu = 3.46$). Students also indicated a somewhat positive extent that participation in such

work improved their leadership skills ($\mu = 3.03$) and understanding of social issues ($\mu = 2.99$). Fair agreement was recorded for peer networking by participating in NGO/CBO work ($\mu = 2.99$) and accepting their interventions on social media ($\mu = 2.98$). Nevertheless, weak concordance was found for more proximal aspects of engagement, such as

volunteerism ($\mu = 2.63$), community service ($\mu = 2.77$), and event/workshop attendance ($\mu = 2.30$). There was a minimum amount of agreement on active participation in these organizations ($\mu = 2.46$), indicating that this was not a major form of direct student participation on the civic site (Sarwar & Farid, 2024).

Table 3: Students' Engagement with NGOs and CBOs (N = 191)

Statements	M	SD
Actively engaged with an NGO or CBO.	2.46	1.22
Attended events, workshops, or training sessions conducted by NGOs/CBOs.	2.30	1.35
Volunteered for NGOs/CBOs.	2.63	1.31
Follow NGOs/CBOs on social media to stay informed about their initiatives.	2.98	1.25
NGOs/CBOs provide resources or support that are valuable to youth.	3.46	1.12
Participated in community service or outreach activities.	2.77	1.26
Engagement with NGOs/CBOs increased understanding of social issues.	2.99	1.25
NGOs/CBOs provide a platform for youth to learn and develop skills.	3.59	1.17
Opportunities to network with other youth through NGOs/CBOs.	2.99	1.17
Involvement with NGOs/CBOs has helped to develop personal leadership skills.	3.03	1.19

Scale: Strongly Disagree (1); Disagree= (2); Neutral = (3); Agree (4); Strongly Agree (5)

Political Participation and Activism

As for political participation and activism (Table 4), moderate interest and participation were displayed by students. The highest consistency was found for intention to vote in the next election ($\mu = 3.43$) and talking politics with friends ($\mu = 3.40$). Students reported a moderate level of involvement in social or political issues ($\mu = 3.06$)

and following political news on social websites ($\mu = 3.02$). More action-oriented types of participation, however, were correspondingly less agreed upon; these included campaign involvement ($\mu = 2.88$), petition signing ($\mu = 2.74$), and especially protest/rally attendance ($\mu = 2.49$). The pattern indicates that students may be politically active and vocal with peers or on the internet, but direct action is still in short supply.

Table 4: Political Participation and Activism (N = 191)

Statements I,	M	SD
Participated in student government or political organizations at my university.	2.60	1.11
Signed petitions, joined protests, or engaged in political activism.	2.49	1.06
Attended a political rally or awareness campaign.	2.49	1.16
Voted in university student body elections.	2.73	1.24
Plan to vote in the upcoming national or local elections.	3.43	1.18
Express my political opinions through social media platforms.	2.91	1.13
Participate in discussions about social or political issues with my peers.	3.40	1.07
Participated in community-based political activities.	2.83	1.12
Actively engage in efforts that address societal or political issues.	3.06	1.07
Engagement with NGOs/CBOs has encouraged me to participate in political activities.	2.69	1.11

Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Gender Differences in Key Study Variables

A carried out an independent samples t-test to assess gender variations in the main study variables. Table 6 showed that male (M = 2.93, SD = 1.01) and female (M = 2.99, SD = 0.97) participants did not have any significant differences in their responses related to the measure of Engagement with NGOs & CBOs, (t =

-0.389, p =. 698) , suggesting that male and female genders were equally engaged in civic activities.

However, there was a higher Political Participation and Activism of the males (M = 3.11, SD = 0.79) than the females (M = 2.71, SD = 0.76), (t =3.31, p =. 001), which signified greater involvement in political activities.

Table 6: Gender Differences in Key Study Variables (Independent Samples t-Test, N = 191)

Study Variables	Male		Female		T	p
	N=70		N=121			
	M	SD	M	SD		
Engagement with NGOs & CBOs	2.93	1.01	2.99	.97	-.389	.698
Political Participation and Activism	3.11	.79	2.71	.76	3.31	.001

Note. Value is significant, $p < .05$

Correlations among Key Variables

The Pearson correlation table available in Table 11 shows critical associations between the variables of the study. It was found that engagement with NGOs and CBOs has a powerful positive relationship with political participation and

activism ($r = .484$, $p < .01$), which is statistically significant, indicating that politically active students are highly bound to engage with NGOs and CBOs. In general, the results imply that NGOs/CBOs' activity is indeed a strong indicator of political participation and activism.

Table 11: Pearson Correlation Matrix of Key Constructs (N = 191)

Key Construct	1	2
Engagement with NGOs & CBOs	1	
Political Participation and Activism	.484**	1

Note. $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Regression Analysis and Predictors of Participation

Results Regression Analysis Table shows that people trusting NGOs and CBOs is a strong, positive predictor of political participation and

activism ($\beta = .484$, $t = 7.59$, $p < .001$), suggesting that more engagement is related to more political participation among university students. This corroborates the initial hypothesis and indicates the compelling effect NGOs and CBOs have on encouraging youth political involvement.

Table 12: Impact of NGOs/CBOs on Political Awareness & Knowledge / political participation and knowledge (N = 191)

Study Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	p
	Beta	Std. Error			
Political Participation and Activism	.390	.051	.484	7.59	.000

Note. Dependent Variable: *Political Participation and Activism*.

$p < .001$ (two-tailed).

Findings and Discussions

The present study examines the impact of NGOs/CBOs engagement on student political participation, activism among university students in Pakistan.

Objective 1: Explore the Impact of NGOs/CBOs' involvement on political participation and activism

The findings of the study reveal that the students' engagement with NGOs/CBOs has a significant impact on their political participation and activism, and support the 1 hypothesis. Multiple regression test also showed that participation in NGOs/CBOs predicted political participation and activism significantly ($\beta = .390$, $p < .001$), further supporting the notion of civic engagement leading to political efficacy (Youniss et al., 2002; Kirlin, 2003). This result is consistent with that obtained by Bennett et al., (2009), who highlighted the onset of "networked activism" supported by non-conventional forms of the civic sphere. It seems that civic organizations work to create a participatory orientation by exposure to protest,

petitioning, and community organizing (Youniss et al., 2002; Torney et al., 2001). These findings imply impact: whereas NGOs and CBOs contribute to the development of political participation and activism. (Henn et al., 2002; Carothers, 2014; Jamal, 2009).

Objective 2: Explore the relationship between engagement with NGOs/CBOs and students' political participation and activism

The results indicate a moderate degree of student involvement with NGOs and CBOs, especially in relation to skill acquisition and social media activism. This supports previous works that have identified NGOs and CBOs as important sites for civic learning, leadership development, and political efficacy among youth (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013; Su, 2010). Respondents somewhat agreed that NGOs and CBOs assisted them in developing the necessary leadership and political consciousness skills, thereby providing evidence that civic institutions are useful and relevant tools for political efficacy and youth empowerment (Campbell, 2009; Verba et al, 1995; Botan, 2007; Flamand, 2008).

Traditional pathways to engagement, such as meeting attendance or volunteering, was found to be substantially less prevalent which supports the findings of Zukin et al. (2006) and Trautman (2006) which identified that youth civic engagement was shifting from more traditional forms of participation to more reliance on digital and passive engagement. Such a trend may in part be indicative of the extent of so-called "latent political participation" which Ekman and Amnå (2012) both describe as political expression and opinion formation without manifest political action (Sarwar & Farid, 2025).

The correlational analysis detected a positive relationship between interaction with NGOs/CBOs and political participation and activism ($r = .484$, $p = .05$), thus Hypothesis 2 (H2) is accepted. This contrasts with previous research, such as Campbell, (2003), which argues that engagement in the local community is one way of offsetting political disengagement.

Objective 3: Differences based on gender in the engagement with NGOs/CBOs, political participation and activism

The gendered analysis has found that political participation and awareness have statistically significant differences. There was a difference in the levels of political participation and activism between male ($M = 3.11$, $SD = .79$) and female students ($M = 2.71$, $SD = .76$; $t = 3.31$, $p = .001$), so it supports 4 hypotheses. These results compare well with existing literature put forward in the documentation of the existence of gender disparities in political knowledge and participation within different socio-political contexts (Burns et al., 2009; Inglehart & Norris, 2003). Nonetheless, they found no substantial gender disparities in the interactions with the NGOs/CBOs and this fact may indicate that civil society space offers an access to opportunities on a relatively even level between the two genders (Coffe & Bolzendahl, 2010). However, it rejects the 3 hypothesis because there is no significant difference between

male and female students in their level of engagement with NGOs and CBOs. These results add up to a rounded picture of civic engagement in the Global South as they illustrate how non-state actors can also be regarded as facilitators of political learning rather than of change in institutions.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has some limitations; firstly, it targets university students, which limits its applicability to the entire youth of the nation (Kiesa et al., 2007). Secondly, bias might be caused by the use of self-reported data (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In addition, the research also failed to investigate internal NGOs/CBOs attributes, which could affect the order of the student (Putnam, 2000). The future research ought to be based on longitudinal and mixed research methods; more youth samples should be incorporated (Norris, 2011).

Conclusion

This paper investigates students' engagement with NGOs and CBOs and its impact on their political participation and activism in Pakistan. As the results indicate, participation in NGOs and CBOs substantially boosts the level of political participation and activism to confirm the belief that civil society is somewhat important in enhancing democratic values and empowering young people. A demographic analysis carried out showed that there has long been a gap in gender representation in political participation, which points to the urgent need to get more female students involved in political engagements. All in all, NGOs and CBOs play a significant role in the participation in the political process.

The present study highlights the need for robust civil society engagement and enabling institutional reforms along with the observed trends. Moreover, upcoming research needs to examine these dynamics on longer and more aggregate timeframes in transitional democracies.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

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