



WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN RURAL WEST BENGAL: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF DETERMINANTS IN MALDA DISTRICT

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

This review is a critical analysis of the factors affecting political awareness and political participation of women in Malda district, West Bengal. The peer-reviewed literature on individual and structural factors – education, socio-economic status, membership in self-help groups (SHGs), social networks, media exposure, and gender quotas - is synthesized with respect to civic engagement of women. The literature demonstrates that SHG membership and increased women networks have contributed greatly to increasing women political knowledge and participation in rural India (Kumar et al., 2019; Prillaman, 2023). The intersection of these determinants is presented in a conceptual model (Figure 1). The introduction of India's 73rd Amendment of required quotas in Malda in particular has created new prospects to women on grassroots despite the existing struggles of patriarchy and the lack of female literacy (Akhtar and Gaurav, 2025). An overview of the literature (Table 1) shows that more educated women, the presence of SHG, and access to specific welfare initiatives (e.g. Kanyashree) correlate with the increased female turnout rate and civic engagement, and the lack of information and socio-cultural constraints tend to limit the engagement (Akhtar and Gaurav, 2025; Dulhunty, 2024). We comment on the ways of how these results are consistent and inconsistent, referring to both local Malda data and to the general evidence. As we have discussed, a multi-pronged approach, consisting of both legal reforms, social networks, and empowerment programs, is required to increase the political agency of women in Malda and other settings.

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DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260402070>

Keywords: *Political Participation, Women Empowerment, Malda District, Political Awareness, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Gender Quotas, Rural Governance, West Bengal, Civic Engagement, Socio-economic Determinants*

Introduction

The context of women political participation in Malda district of north Bengal is not a very easy one. As a region that is economically disadvantaged and whose social norms were traditionally conservative, Malda has lost out on female literacy and empowerment historically. According to recent analyses, although there is progress in the policy, Malda women are still largely excluded in decision-making. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment of India (1992) was a breakthrough that allocated a third of the rural councils seats to women. The effect of this reform was a massive enhancement of the formal representation of women in village governments around the country. In Malda, researchers note that the quota led to new horizons being open: women in rural areas started challenging local elections, and, in the course of time, started to take up leadership in health, education, and self-help groups. As an example, Akhtar and Gaurav (2025) observe that the involvement of Malda women in local governance is on the increase, particularly when they are recruited in SHGs and develop confidence. However, the level of female literacy in Malda is low and gender inequality is present; such structural inabilities still hinder the process of female political awareness and agency (Akhtar and Gaurav, 2025; Mandal, 2025). This review evaluates the factors that influence the women political awareness and participation in Malda by integrating Malda-specific knowledge with the knowledge in the literature on the rural India. We will discuss the impact of such factors as education, social networks, SHG membership, and cultural norms and the role of women on civic participation, compare Malda experience with the evidence of other areas of India. It is done in an attempt to critically synthesize the factors that either promote or impede the political empowerment of women in Malda and other places.

Literature Review

According to a study on India and similar settings, there are various interactive factors influencing the political participation of women. First of all there is education: a more educated woman has more political awareness and tends to vote or participate in civic forums. As an example, in a survey-based research of North Indian women, Kaur (2025) notes that, as the level of formal

education of women increases, the more likely will their tendency to engage in politics (e.g. voting, rallies). Meanwhile, a low female literacy level in Malda is also an impediment; a spatial analysis has reported that the literacy level in Malda was one of the lowest in West Bengal and that high levels of gender literacy disparity would hamper the development of the societies. In the same way, the socio-economic level is significant: women who are more financially independent are more mobile and have more networks, which allows them to participate in the society (Choudhury et al., 2025). The membership in micro-finance groups (SHGs) in Malda was linked to earnings control and confidence, which subsequently enhances civic voice (Akhtar and Gaurav, 2025). The conceptual model of these determinants provided in Figure 1 depicts that individual resources (education, wealth), social channels (SHG membership, community networks, media exposure), and institutional reforms (gender quotas, welfare schemes) influence women to be politically aware and eventually participate in politics (Kumar et al., 2019; Prillaman, 2023).

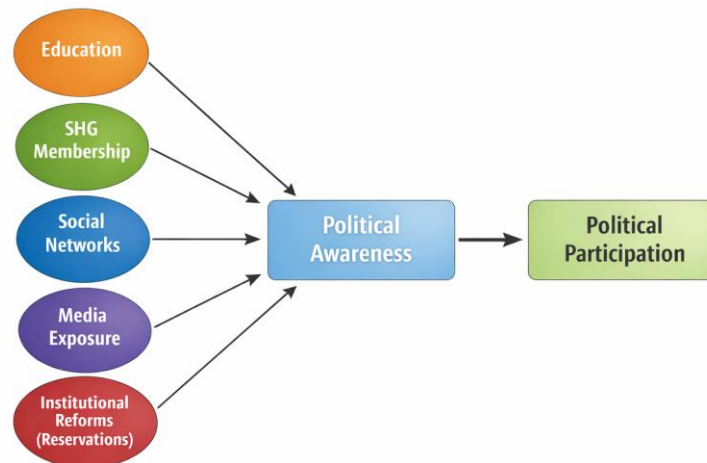


Figure 1. Conceptual model of key determinants of women's political awareness and participation. Education, SHG membership, social networks, media exposure, and institutional reforms (reservation) are shown as influencing awareness and participation (Kumar et al., 2019).

The fact that women join SHGs is replicated as a powerful enabling factor of political participation. Much of the evidence gathered in India indicates that membership in an SHG is associated with increased civic activity. In a study of 12 states, women in SHGs had much more political participation than no members - they had better knowledge of entitlements in the public and were almost twice as much likely to participate in village meetings. Prillaman (2023) also concludes that women who joined all-women credit collectives basically doubled the number of times they attended local public meetings through the utilization of new information and collective skills. Such organizations increase the women network and pool capacity (Prillaman, 2023). Cheek and Corbett (2024) capture the situation in the rural community of West Bengal where SHGs engage in community development (such as the development of roads or safety nests) and state that such decision making by women in the public space disrupts patriarchal structures. SHGs enable women leaders to express themselves by creating a separate identity. According to Dulhanty (2024), the relationship between SHGs and local politics, however, is highly complex: SHGs tend to raise awareness, but in case partisan actors infiltrate group patterns, they may attract women into conflicts. On the whole, the literature indicates a high probability that SHGs are major processes of information-sharing and empowerment (Desai and Joshi, 2014; Kumar et al., 2019).

There are other social factors that affect awareness. Internet-based relationships - in SHGs as well as in larger women associations - result in political mobilization. Women who have been newly elected can be mentored by peers engaged in civic activities and their confidence can be boosted (Prillaman, 2023). Media exposure and information also count. In Malda, Mandal (2025) notes that more access to news (through TV and smartphones) leads to issue-centered voting, meaning that the media has the capacity to make women more politically informed. On the other hand, women, especially living in most of the rural regions still get the last priority whenever it comes to access to information and therefore they depend on local leaders or family to get information on elections. Formal spaces allow women to be created by institutions like gender quotas in the local councils. Research in West Bengal and elsewhere has revealed that in areas where reservation laws were in place, many more women were elected to office and governance priorities were changed. In a famous study, Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) showed that in Indian villages where women were only allowed to live, investment was made on items that were more beneficial to women such as clean water implying that representation was convertible to empowerment. The law of 1993 in Malda was a milestone, which brought constitutional legitimacy to rural councils and guaranteed women leadership in rural councils the first time. According to Ghosh and Kumar (2014), in the Panchayats post-reservations in West Bengal, close to 39% of village seats were secured by women (one-third, which is the statutory figure). In this way policy reforms did not only increase sheer numbers, but started to change gender relations in village politics.

Table 1: Key Studies on Women’s Political Participation and Awareness

Study (Authors, Year)	Context	Methodology	Key Findings
Kumar et al. (2019)	Rural India (multiple states)	Matched survey data, statistical	SHG membership linked to higher political engagement, awareness, and use of entitlements
Prillaman (2023)	Rural India (Bangladesh as model)	Survey, field experiment	Participation in women’s networks doubled women’s attendance at local meetings; networks, skills, and info sharing were mechanisms
Desai & Joshi (2014)	Rural India	Field experiment (RCT)	SHG promotion increased women’s participation in household decisions and civic activities
Choudhury et al. (2025)	Nadia district, WB	Survey of 379 SHG women	Economic empowerment (credit access) most strongly increased; women view financial factors as primary for empowerment
Cheek & Corbett (2024)	West Bengal villages	Qualitative case study	Collective SHG-led projects (e.g. wells, roads) increased women’s public agency, challenging patriarchal norms
Dulhunty (2024)	West Bengal (case analysis)	Field observation, interviews	Confirms SHGs raise political awareness but shows potential conflicts when parties engage SHGs
Ghosh & Kumar (2014)	WB, Cooch Behar (Haldibari block)	Election data; interviews	After 1993 quotas, women held ~38.7% of Gram Panchayat seats, mainly SC women, indicating increased lower-caste women’s participation
Akhtar & Gaurav (2025)	Malda district, WB	Survey, interviews	73 rd Amendment opened women’s participation; SHGs and govt schemes raised women’s confidence and roles, but patriarchy and low education still constrain many
Kaur (2025) (in press)	Punjab, India	Survey	Finds higher education levels among women strongly predict political participation (voting, rallies)
Bhuiyan (2019)	Bangladesh (rural PRIs)	Survey, analysis	Identifies patriarchal norms, poverty, and lack of education as barriers to women’s local political participation
Chattopadhyay & Duflo (2004)	West Bengal, India	Quasi-experimental policy analysis	Women as village leaders invested more in women’s needs (water, roads), demonstrating influence on policy priorities
Kabeer (2005)	South Asia (theory)	Conceptual analysis	Argues empowerment is about agency and choice; notes that quotas alone do not overcome deep social constraints

Methodology (Review Approach)

This research takes the form of a narrative critical-review technique. We undertook an intensive literature review of social science databases and institutional archives of peer-reviewed papers on the subject of women political participation, empowerment, and awareness in India (West Bengal in particular). Articles published approximately 2000-2025 were identified in databases, including Web of science, Google Scholar, and SSRN. Keywords were; women political participation India, self-help groups rural India, women empowerment West Bengal, women awareness Malda etc. The empirical research and reviews incorporated in the indexed journals were prioritized by us and those that clearly focus on the determinants of the civic engagement of women. The chosen sources comprise cross-sectional surveys, field experiments that were selected randomly, and case studies carried out qualitatively. Relevance of all of the sources to Malda or in general similar contexts in India was considered. The review is thematic (education, economic factors, social networks, quotas) instead of the quantification of data. No data were gathered fresh, but the methodology critically compares and contrasts the research results between studies. Table 1 (above) was compiled using essential information of large-scale studies in order to compare their context, methods, and conclusions. In the process, the review highlights the ways in which the wider literature helps in the illumination of the particular case of Malda, and where Malda does not correspond to other places.

Results and Synthesis

The literature analysis indicates that there are a number of consistent patterns. To begin with, education comes out as a determinant. Surveys continue to conclude that the more education the more female involvement and political awareness. Kaur (2025) directly links the issue of women with higher formal education with higher voter turnout and increased attendance of the public meeting. In the area of Malda where the level of female literacy was always lower, it means that the enhancement of the level of education of girls may empower the further civic participation (Akhtar and Gaurav, 2025). Second, economic empowerment is associated with the involvement of the people. Not only do SHGs and microfinance enhance incomes but also they are seen as a medium of information and collective action. Kumar et al. (2019) demonstrate that SHG members in India are more engaged in local politics and aware of schemes in the public. There is also a similarity between Choudhury et al. (2025), who discover that the Malda-area women in credit-group membership attribute the growth of their agency to financial independence. Financially, women seem to have the resources and confidence to be political.

Third, peer support and social networks are important. Prillaman (2023) concludes that the homosocial networks of women (in villages or SHGs) are twice as likely to increase the attendance at meeting and civic skills of women. Women become more active when they see their peers as role models or they are encouraged. Cheek and Corbett (2024) show how the apparent effectiveness of local women in projects (e.g. clean water schemes) will lead to others being inspired; they observe that it created an identity of SHGs that allowed the public to take part. Dulhunty (2024), on the other hand, warns that it can be difficult instead of easy to increase participation when partisan interests are introduced into the network of women. Regardless of such nuances, the majority of the available evidence shows that collective social capital - through SHGs, cooperatives, or women clubs - play a significant role in increasing political awareness and political activity.

Fourth, ensuring conditions are established by reservation and policy environment. It has been demonstrated through the Indian experience that reserved seats have made women significantly more representative and have changed the priorities of governance (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Ghosh and Kumar (2014) discover that most women in West Bengal, particularly those belonging to disadvantaged castes, are taking up village offices as a direct result of mandatory quotas. Akhtar and Gaurav (2025) observe that in Malda, women in the rural areas began to actively engage in local governance following the 73rd amendment and slowly became leaders. In addition, the state welfare schemes in favor of women (including Kanyashree scholarships among girls) have organized female political support in Malda (Mandal, 2025). The literature however also warns that quotas will not entirely empower women in case the social norms do not change (Kabeer, 2005). In fact, female candidates in Malda were initially elected due to the influence of male members of the family, and the consequences of pervasive patriarchy is that some women are ready to become a sort of deputies representing family interests (Akhtar & Gaurav, 2025).

These and other studies have been summarized in Table 1 above. In a variety of settings, the evidence has been convergent on essential facilitators, including education, collective organizing and supportive policy. As an illustration, in a randomized assessment by Desai and Joshi (2014), SHG promotion was found to have a strong positive impact on civic behavior and decision-making power of women in their households. Prillaman (2023) presents the causal support indicating that the gap between participation can be bridged by the newly formed women collectives almost instantly. Cheek and Corbett (2024) and Dulhunty (2024) explain the impact of West Bengal-specific SHG projects on the agency of women. In the meantime, Akhtar and Gaurav (2025) and Mandal (2025) add Malda-specific measures, which associate formal political inclusion and local schemes with an incremental gain in awareness and activism among women. On the whole, the synthesis shows that women become more aware of their rights and engagement in the sphere, as they become educated, possess resources, and contacts.

Discussion

The evidence produced is an indication of a complex image of political empowerment of women in Malda. The enablers are education and access to information. In line with the national trends, educated and more educated Malda women seem awareness and willingness to take part in politics. This indicates that the long-term returns of civic participation can be realized by further growth of schooling of girls in Malda. Economic aspects are not insignificant either; financial empowerment created by SHG in Malda has already increased the confidence and community participation of many women (Akhtar and Gaurav, 2025). The studies reviewed suggest that an enhanced credit and livelihood programs would allow more time and resources to women so that they can become politically involved.

Group solidarity and social networks are critical. There is substantial evidence that collective action systems, particularly those with women only, are the means of awareness and mobilization. These networks reduce the social cost of participation and disseminate knowledge as it was illustrated by Kumar et al. (2019) and Prillaman (2023). The SHGs offer a new social domain in the rural environment of Malda where women were not allowed to interact much with others. The participation will be raised by the policies that foster the formation of women groups, or involve civic-training in SHGs. In fact, the awareness-raising capabilities of SHGs as revealed by Dulhunty (2024) show that it is necessary to cultivate such networks without allowing them to be subjugated by partisan elites.

This is also dependent on institutional factors. There has been a proven growth in the number of women in the quota system. The case of Malda fits the findings of Ghosh and Kumar in West Bengal: reservation caused a sudden increase in female officeholders (and many of underprivileged castes). It is a pre-condition of this legal inclusion, although empowerment, as Kabeer (2005) asserts, needs changes in the relations of social power as well. The literature points out that certain elected Malda women were originally functioning on male influence (Akhtar and Gaurav, 2025), which reminds that numbers do not necessarily mean agency. Long-term support - including training sessions, mentoring by more advanced women leaders, and community sensitization programs - seems to be the main factor to turn the legal achievements into real empowerment. National schemes should be supplemented by Malda-specific programs (e.g. local civic education drives).

Conclusion

This review highlights that the levels of awareness and participation of women in the political arena of Malda has been influenced by education, economy, social, and institutional factors. Increased literacy and education are linked with increased engagement whereas poverty and patriarchy discourage it. Women who belong to women groups and broadened networks have been found to significantly increase civic activity in women (Kumar et al., 2019; Prillaman, 2023). The 73rd Amendment and welfare schemes in Malda provided a formal avenue of participation and many women have started to assert themselves in local politics (Akhtar and Gaurav, 2025). However, unrelenting issues such as low female literacy and patriarchal ideals remain and prevent full actualization of participation. Additional policies which enhance the education of girls, help women gain economic independence

and empower SHGs would tend to reinforce the observed trends. The solution requires a concerted effort that would solve both the organizational and social issues. Overall, the Malda experience is in line with the evidence on the broader evidence: structural reforms and collective action by women can effectively increase political inclusion, yet creating gender equality in participation will be a long-term process that needs to be pursued on many different levels.

Acknowledgment: No

Author's Contribution: Priyanka Saha: Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

Funding: No

Declaration: The author has given consent for the publication.

Competing Interest: No

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