



THE NEXUS BETWEEN SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AND POLITICAL AGENCY: A MICRO-LEVEL ANALYSIS OF MUSLIM FEMALE

Nurjima Khatun

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details:

Research Scholar, Govt. J.P. Verma
P.G. Arts and Commerce College,
Bilaspur, India

Abstract

This paper will discuss the impact of the political awareness and socialization practices and exposure to the media on political participation of the Muslim women in India in the broader context of South Asia and the world at large. It relies on current literature (2010-present) to summarize the research results to evaluate both the obstacles to the participation of Muslim women in politics and the boosters. The discussion concludes that educational and political illiteracy, socialization along patriarchal lines, and concomitant religious and gender prejudices have limited the performance of Muslim women in the formal politics (e.g. voting, representation). The same is, however, changing under the influence of recent trends - access to education has been increased, grassroots mobilization, but most notably, the emergence of digital media, which is transforming the process of political socialization and allowing new types of engagement. The social media has also increased political awareness and enabled activism and networking which has enabled women to fight stereotypes and fight to protect their rights. Simultaneously, structural barriers like the digital gender gap, the issue of security and communalist discourses still restrict equal participation. The study in general presents a dynamic and interactive relationship between awareness, media, and socialization in empowering the vocal of Muslim women about politics. It argues that specific measures such as literacy enhancement to inclusive media to provide Muslim women with representation and agency in the Indian democratic processes are important.

Corresponding Author:

Nurjima Khatun

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260402098>

Keywords: *Socio-Economic Status, Political Agency, Muslim Female Leadership, Malda District*

Introduction

The South Asian Muslims especially India have had a very long history of barriers to political participation. Indian Muslim women face a kind of a double invasion as the representatives of a minority religion and victims of gender roles implying a lack of women in politics (Jahan, 2021). Their socio-economic indicators are lower than in other groups - e.g. literacy of Indian Muslims females (around 52-percent) is below the national average of female literacy by far. These education and awareness gaps equate to a lack of political knowledge and interest. Traditional cultural gender roles and purdah (practices of seclusion) in most Muslim societies have curtailed the visibility and civic action of women. The political socialization process in conservative family and community systems has tended to deter Muslim women regarding their political activism or leadership, and reinforcement of an idea that politics is a masculine sphere. Political involvement by Muslim women until recently was mostly limited to voting (so often under pressure by the male family members) and informal work in the community with a very small number managing to secure leadership.

Concurrently, more general scholarship makes us remember that the inclusion of women in politics is the key to a healthy democracy. A democratic community cannot succeed in a society that politically marginalizes half of the population (Paxton & Hughes, 2017). Gender disparity in the political participation has been recorded internationally, particularly in most Muslim dominant settings. There has been an increase in the number of women in India in the recent past whose turnout during the elections has increased to an almost equal percentage as that of the men thus reflecting an increase in the electoral participation of women in India in general. But still Muslim women are drastically underrepresented in institutional politics - of the Indian Lok Sabha (lower house) less than 18 Muslim women have ever served all since independence, making up less than 1% of the total number of MPs. Such underrepresentation is not due to a deficiency of interest or ability, but is systemic due to such factors as low levels of literacy, economic reliance, stereotypical views on the part of communities that stereotype Muslim women as being oppressed or apolitical.

Literature Review

• Political Participation and Socialization of Muslim Women in Context

Family, education, peer groups, and media are also described as important agents of civic values and norms transmission described in classical theories of political socialization (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady, 1995). These forms of socialization have long in the past taught political disengagement to Muslim women in India. Most Muslim mothers are raised in patriarchal families where women are not allowed to make substantial decisions and therefore most women are not given a chance to discuss politics or formulate independent opinions (Jahan, 2021). The fact that there are still certain aspects of the community that are patriarchal and are conservative with regard to religion has cemented the idea that women should place greater emphasis on the household over the life of a citizen. In fact, a current countrywide survey has revealed that two out of every three Indian women themselves feel somewhat controlled by their male relatives which rather suppresses their politics. These gender conventions among the Muslim women don't converge of community identities: community leaders have occasionally marginalized active political participation among women on the pretext of decency or even tradition (Hasan and Menon, 2004). This socialization has led to poor political awareness among the women, most of the Muslim women have lacked knowledge about their legal-political rights and even at opportunities to be involved beyond the vote. As Rozina Jahan (2021) points out, the interplay between gender and religion in India has resulted in a stratified marginalization: Muslim women tend to have no knowledge, networks, and confidence to join the sphere of politics which is dominated by men belonging to other groups.

Compared scholarship emphasizes the fact that these tendencies are not peculiar to India. The analysis of 13 Muslim-majority countries by Hilde Coffe and Selin Dilli (2015) such as, found that there was a continued gender gap in the political activity which was attributed in large to the less access to education and paid work by women which are the resources that generally bolster political efficacy. The extent of the Islamisation of a state and general measures of gender equality in society did not explain cross-national variation in the gap either in their study, which implies that the context-specific socio-political variable is at work. The Sachar Committee Report (2006) recorded the dramatic lack of education and employment among Muslim women in India compared with other communities, which support the manner in which socio-economic disempowerment can be translated into political under-participation. The issue of low literacy has been especially recalcitrant: by 2011, approximately half of all Muslim women were literate, versus 65 percent of all Hindu women and more than 70 percent of all Indian women. These educational inequalities have their immediate political repercussions since political awareness and acquisition of information thrives on literacy and schooling. Research has always depicted that educated women are more politically interested and confident. The authors stress that these structural inequalities are reflected in the media - over the years of existence of mainstream media was used to depict Muslim women as voiceless victims instead of citizens, which may decrease their sense of self-efficacy in the political sphere (Shabir and Khan, 2022).

Methodology

The study will use the meta-synthesis approach of qualitative research, which requires reviewing and combining the findings of the peer-reviewed literature on the subject of political participation by Muslim women published after 2010. This is intended to explain modern tendencies interdisciplinarily, in contrast to primary data collection. The question is based on the three central themes found in the literature awareness, political socialization and media influence and their effect on the outcome of the political participation of Muslim women.

The literature in the political science, sociology, gender studies, and media studies were all canvassed in order to provide a comprehensive perspective. Academic databases (e.g. Scopus, Google Scholar) were searched with the keywords such as: Muslim women India politics, women political participation South Asia, social media Muslim women and political socialization women minority. This provided a body of about 50 relevant sources which comprised of empirical research articles, survey reports and theoretical essays. Only the sources of reputable journals and academic publishers were prioritized to qualify as reliable in scholarly terms, and in any chance, data and claims were cross-checked among the two or more studies. Major articles that have been reviewed are case studies (e.g. Parveen et al. 2025 on social media in Uttar Pradesh), large-n analyses (e.g. Coffe and Dilli 2015 on gender gaps across nations), and qualitative accounts (e.g. Hussain 2024 on the stories of protests by Muslim women). South Asian regional comparisons and global frameworks were also included in the review so as to place the Indian experience in context.

The information in the sampled studies was collected and thematically coded. The coding targeted: (a) signs of political awareness/knowledge among Muslim women; (b) political socialization agents and processes (family, religious institutions, schools, media, etc.); (c) the role of traditional media vs. new media in goal formation and action; (d) types of political participation (voting behavior, representation in elected bodies, protest activism, digital activism); and (e) perceived barriers and facilitating factors. Where quantitative data existed (i.e. the internet usage rates, the literacy rates, the turnout rates, the representation rates), it was recorded to be aggregated. The methodology adopted was therefore similar to an integrative review, which combined quantitative results and qualitative evidence to construct a multidimensional knowledge.

Results

• Rising Awareness and Education Levels

Political awareness - knowledge about political processes, rights, and the existing issues is one of the basic motivators of political

participation. The awareness of politics among the Indian Muslim women has traditionally been low in the context of low education and confinement of the general discourse. Nonetheless, recent statistics show slow increases in education level, which is associated with increased political awareness and participation. Several studies confirm this fact education is one of the driving factors: Muslim women who have more education show much more interest in politics and readiness to vote or express opinions. As an example, a literature review conducted by Shabna (2023) established that Muslim women who have attended college in India were significantly more likely to talk about politics and think of a political position than women who received only a primary education. It is a trend that can be observed in the success stories of local governance. In Kerala, in the Malappuram district where a vigorous campaign was undertaken to educate and train women to hold public office, 591 Muslim women are now elected to village councils (panchayats) 36 of them being the presidents of the panchayats. Observers posit that increasing education and awareness is what enabled these women to make the incredible step out of the domestic domain to successfully control local governments and weaken traditional beliefs.

There are still disparities even after such pockets of progress. According to the national census and survey data, Muslim women as a group continue to be left behind the other communities in matters of literacy and other awareness factors. The gap in figure 1 is in an essential enabler of political awareness, which is access to the internet as a source of news and information. The graph indicates the proportion of men and women who have ever used the internet in India not only to demonstrate the presence of a high gender gap in the country (57% of men vs. 33% of women, as of 2019-21), but also to underscore the significantly low levels of internet access among women in such a large state as Uttar Pradesh (around 21% only). This statistic, as a region, highlights a digital disadvantage many Muslim women are at because Uttar Pradesh has a high Muslim population. Reduced internet access implies reduced access to self-gaining political news, keeping up to date on the latest news, or participating in civic movements via the internet.

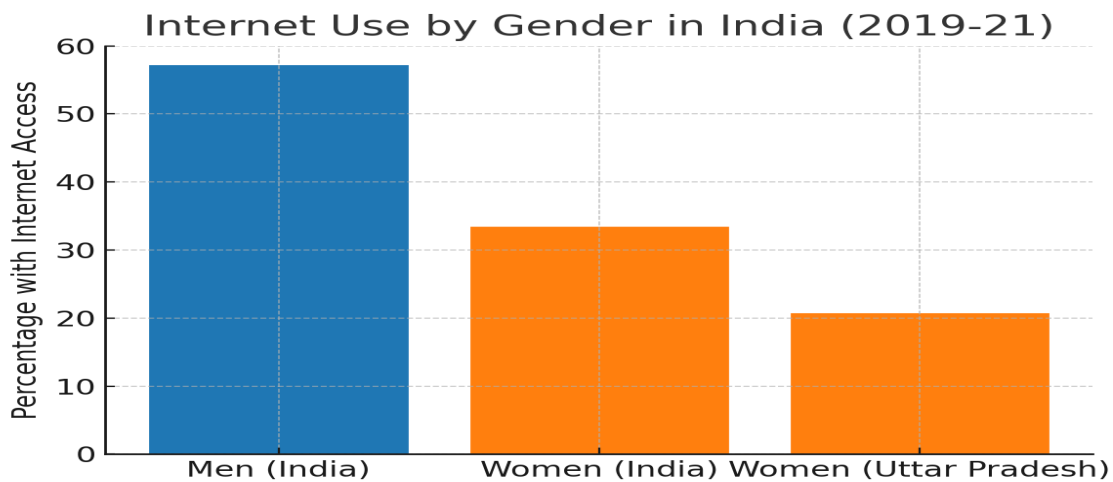


Figure 1. Proportion of individuals who have ever used the Internet in India, by gender (2019–21). Nationally, only one-third of women have internet access, compared to over half of men. In Uttar Pradesh, women’s access is especially low (around 20%), reflecting regional and community disparities. Limited internet access constrains Muslim women’s exposure to political information. Sources: NFHS-5 data reported in Parveen et al. (2025).

Nevertheless, the overall trajectory points upward. Younger Muslim women exhibit much higher educational aspirations than earlier generations (Jeffery & Jeffery, 2022). They are also more likely to be bilingual (learning Hindi/English along with Urdu or their mother tongue), which expands their media consumption and civic horizons. Surveys of youth in cities like Aligarh and Hyderabad show Muslim female college students increasingly confident in discussing topics like government policies, voting, and women’s rights (Ahmad, 2020). This growing awareness is setting the stage for greater political participation. Several respondents in these surveys noted that seeing Muslim women role models – such as socially active scholars, lawyers involved in the Triple Talaq case, or leaders of the anti-CAA protests – inspired them to stay informed and consider engagement in student or community politics.

- **Patterns of Participation: Electoral, Institutional, and Activism**

The impact of increased awareness, the shifts in the socialization process, and the influence of media consumption put together, we can see the changing trends in the political participation of Muslim women. Such patterns can be grouped into three domains including electoral participation, representation in the governance and the grassroots activism.

Electoral participation (voting and electioneering): The past outcomes of Muslim women as far as their participation in electoral processes are concerned has been lower when compared to both the Muslim men and even the women who are not Muslims. This is a gap that is being bridged. This according to analysts was the first time that the turnout of Muslim women in the 2019 general elections almost equaled that of Muslim men in many states. This is partly explained by the Election Commission activities and civil society forces which particularly focused on Muslim women with voter education (e.g. campaigns about how

to vote and why it is important to make an independent choice). According to Rozina Jahan (2021), older Muslim women tended to vote under the guidance of the individuals within their family, whereas younger women tend to be more autonomous in voting preference, with a quarter of the respondents indicating that she voted differently to the presumed vote of her family members - an indication of individual political agency. The Muslim women are also becoming more active in election campaigning at local level. Women party workers (including Muslims) were used to do door-to-door canvassing, and mobilize female voters during recent elections in states with a high Muslim population such as West Bengal and Kerala. It has been a peer-to-peer method of successfully surmounting the cultural reluctance of mingling with unknown men; the Muslim women voters tend to be much more at ease with female campaigners who are in their ethnic group. As a result, political parties are realizing the need to use Muslim women in the outreach processes when seeking the Muslim vote bank.

Table 1. Key Barriers and Enablers for Muslim Women’s Political Participation in India (2010s–2020s)

Barriers (Challenges Inhibiting Participation)	Enablers (Factors Facilitating Participation)
Patriarchal Norms & Gender Roles: Traditional expectations confine women to domestic spheres, limiting time, mobility, and familial support for political involvement. Early socialization often discourages assertiveness or leadership in women.	Education & Awareness: Improved access to education has empowered many Muslim women with knowledge of their rights and increased confidence. Higher literacy and political awareness correlate with greater interest in voting and public affairs.
Community Conservatism: Conservative religious interpretations and community pressure sometimes deter women’s public engagement (e.g. skepticism toward women contesting elections or speaking on mixed platforms). Women fear social backlash for breaking norms.	Legal Reforms & Quotas: Institutional measures like the 33% reservation for women in local governments (Panchayati Raj) have brought thousands of Muslim women into governance at the grassroots. These experiences build leadership skills and normalize women’s presence in politics. Recent passage of a national women’s reservation bill promises future opportunities (though implementation is pending).
Socio-Economic Marginalization: High rates of poverty, unemployment, and domestic responsibility leave many Muslim women without resources (time, money, networks) to engage politically. Low economic empowerment reduces political bargaining power.	Women’s Organizations & Networks: Muslim women-led NGOs and collectives (e.g. BMMA) have mobilized women at the grassroots, provided civic education, and advocated on issues like personal law reform, thereby fostering a supportive community for political activism (Kirmani, 2011). Shared identity networks give women role models and encouragement.
Political Exclusion & Party Bias: Major political parties have nominated very few Muslim women candidates, citing winnability concerns or patriarchal patronage structures. This limits pathways for those aspiring to formal politics. Additionally, communal politics in India sidelines minorities; Muslim women face double discrimination.	Digital Media & Communication: Social media and mobile communication enable Muslim women to access information, voice opinions, and organize beyond traditional barriers. Digital engagement has raised awareness (through news, discussions) and allowed women to partake in campaigns and movements from which they might be physically barred. It also helps build new leadership (e.g. bloggers, social influencers advocating women’s rights).
Stereotypes and Islamophobia: Prejudiced narratives portray Muslim women as oppressed or apolitical, dampening their perceived or self-ascribed political agency. Media and society have often ignored their contributions. In hostile environments, women may self-censor for safety.	Role Models & Success Stories: Visibility of successful Muslim women leaders and activists in recent years (from local sarpanches and councilors to prominent protest leaders like Bilkis “Dadi” Bano) has inspired other women. These role models demonstrate that Muslim women <i>can</i> excel in public life, challenging internalized stereotypes.
Security and Mobility Concerns: Communal violence and harassment (both online and offline) disproportionately affect Muslim women who step into public roles. Fear of safety (e.g. during campaigns or protests) and actual experiences of targeting (trolling, threats) create an atmosphere of intimidation that deters participation.	Supportive Legislation & Alliances: Broader women’s rights movements and legal safeguards (e.g. protection against domestic violence, equal inheritance laws in debate) contribute to an environment where women’s equality is recognized, indirectly benefiting Muslim women. Cross-community feminist alliances have amplified Muslim women’s issues, integrating them into wider gender equality campaigns and lending strength in numbers (Ali, 2024).

As Table 1 shows, the challenges are multidimensional – spanning social, economic, cultural, and political realms – but so are the emerging positive factors. The net outcome of these opposing forces is reflected in evolving participation trends.

Discussion

The results of this synthesis describe how constraints of the past and empowering forces of the present interact to give rise to the political participation of Muslim women. To explain these findings, it can be helpful to place them in the framework of the South Asian socio-political context as well as the general field of the literature on gender and politics.

The relevance of structural inequalities - e.g. education and economic status - in participation is one of such themes. It is in line with previous research conducted all over the world (e.g. Coffe & Dilli, 2015) that discovered that the decreased political activity of women in Muslim-majority countries can be explained mainly by their low socio-economic status. We can observe an Indian version of that dynamic: The historical lack of literacy and participation in the labor force, as well as mobility, has hindered civic participation of Muslim women. Nonetheless, when even such indicators are being improved, albeit, to a small extent, the engagement increases visibly. That implies that social empowerment goes hand in hand with political empowerment. The example of the panchayats of Malappuram, where policy intervention (women reservations) and emphasis on the role of girls in the community resulted in unprecedented number of Muslim women in local office, clearly shows that Muslim women do put up, and do work effectively in the governmental sphere when the structural barriers are removed. Their success stories break the orientalist patterns according to which Muslim women are by nature passive or limited by religion. Rather, it is made clear that context - especially, supportive policies and inclusive institutions - is of the essence. The case of Malappuram is also similar to other studies in Bangladesh and Pakistan whereby reserved seats and local quotas boosted the political participation of women though with challenges (Nazneen and Tasneem, 2018).

One of the most prominent aspects of the contemporary participation is the role of the media, especially the social media, in political socialization and mobilization. We can support the concept that social media has emerged as an alternative civic space of women whose physical world is restrictive with our findings. This has a practical and theoretical meaning. In a practical sense, this implies that the endeavors to make Muslim women more politically active will have to fight the digital divide. Increasing the internet availability and digital literacy among Muslim women would disproportionately affect their civic inclusion, which would essentially increase their exposure to political information and networks (Parveen et al., 2025). In theory, it implies the reconsideration of the concept of the public sphere when it comes to the gender segregation - the Habermasian notion of a single public sphere is not as applicable when women (particularly, belonging to conservative groups) have alternative discursive space on the Internet. The empowerment potential of social media however is associated with the dark side of online harassment. The targeted misogynistic, Islamophobic trolling of Muslim women is an intersection of both misogyny and Islamophobia, which some people have called an intersectional form of Islamophobia, gendered (Shahid, 2022). It is a reminder that one barrier (physical seclusion) is dropped, and the other one appears (cyber abuse). This indicates that effective legal and platform-level safeguards against hate speech on the internet are required to prevent hate speech on the internet, a peculiarity of modern participation is the role of media, in particular, social media, in socialization and mobilization in politics. Our findings support the notion that social media is turning out to be another form of civic space where women who are circumscribed in the real one find themselves. In reality, it implies that when attempting to increase the political participation of Muslim women, the digital divide should be considered. Increasing internet penetration and internet literacy of Muslim women may hasten their coverage of political information and contacts (Parveen et al., 2025). Ideally, it implies a re-evaluation of how the marginalized women become part of the public. The empowerment potential of social media, however, comes at the dark side of online harassment. The intended misogynistic effort to troll Muslim women is a convergence of misogyny and Islamophobia, which others have labeled as gendered Islamophobia. It becomes a reminder that when one of the walls (physical seclusion) collapses, another wall (cyber abuse) is formed. This is an indication of why there should be more legal and platform safety measures against Internet hate so that Internet participation is a secure route.

Conclusion

The very little political indulgence that the Muslim women in India had had before is currently under the transitional stage of change that is slowly, but surely, discernible. This paper has demonstrated that increased awareness through education, change in the socialization of politics, and the impact of the media and more so the digital media is enabling Muslim women to emerge as more active citizens. In India, modern Muslim women are starting to vote independently, become a part of the local government, and be the leaders of social movements and break the stereotypical vision of the apolitical Muslim and voiceless woman. They are, practically, broadening the meaning of political participation to encompass not only formal political participation but also protest, dialogue, and online expression.

Meanwhile, there are fundamental obstacles. The factor of patriarchy, socio-economic marginalization, and communal prejudice still restrict the hope of many Muslim women to participate in politics. The advancement is not linear: it is seen the most among younger, educated urban women, and those in more conservative rural areas are relatively disenfranchised. It will be necessary to fill this gap through intentional policy consideration and social transformation. The results highlight the importance of the fact that the initiatives such as the enhancement of the access to education, the establishment of the policy of the representation of women, and the use of media to promote inclusive messaging can be profitable. In the case of India, it is not just an issue of equity to empower Muslim women to exercise full democracy, but also the enhancement of political discourse by having voices that had not been heard previously.

Acknowledgment: No

Author's Contribution: Nurjima Khatun: Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

Funding: No

Declaration: The author has given consent for the publication.

Competing Interest: No

References

1. Abu-Lughod, L. (2013). *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
2. Boulianne, S. (2020). Twenty years of digital media effects on civic and political participation. *Information, Communication & Society*, 23(1), 21–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1637444>
3. Coffé, H., & Dilli, S. (2015). The gender gap in political participation in Muslim-majority countries. *International Political Science Review*, 36(5), 526–544. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512114528228>
4. Farris, S. (2017). *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
5. Gupta, P., Gökarıksel, B., & Smith, S. (2020). The politics of saving Muslim women in India: Gendered geolegality, security, and territorialization. *Political Geography*, 83, 102257. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102257>
6. Hussain, S. (2024). Feminist counter-authoritarian political agency: Muslim girls re-generating politics in India. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 102, 102850. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2023.102850>
7. Jahan, R. (2021). Political participation of Muslim women in India: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies*, 7(2), 94–106. (in press)
8. Kirmani, N. (2011). Beyond the impasse? Muslim feminism(s) and the Indian women's movement. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 45(1), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/006996671004500101>
9. Mundt, M. D., Ross, K., & Burnett, C. M. (2018). Scaling social movements through social media: The case of Black Lives Matter. *Social Media + Society*, 4(4), 2056305118807911. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118807911>
10. Parveen, B., Gouda, N. K., & Jan, S. A. (2025). Shaping public opinion: The role of social media in Muslim women's empowerment in Uttar Pradesh. *Asian Journal for Public Opinion Research*, 13(2), 232–262. <https://doi.org/10.15206/ajpor.2025.13.2.232>
11. Raj, S. (2023). Digital media and women's political participation in India. *Media Watch*, 14(3), 366–385. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09760911231185975>
12. Shabir, A., & Khan, T. A. (2022). Media as an instrument of reflection or distortion of the real-life problems of Muslim women in India. *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies*, 8(1), 86–96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23944811221096943>

Publisher's Note

The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published data, map and institutional affiliations.

©The Author(s) 2026. Open Access.

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>