



Barriers and Drivers of Political Participation among Muslim Women in Rural Malda: A Study of Panchayati Raj Institutions

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ABSTRACT

There has been a rise in certain attention to Muslim women in rural India in the context of political participation following the nomination of gender quotas as a part of local government. This paper discusses the obstacles and motivators to the participation of Muslim women in Panchayati Raj Institutions in Malda, a Muslim dominated rural district of West Bengal. The research will be based on secondary sources and available empirical researches and note that women are faced with multifaceted socio-cultural, economical and institutional obstacles that slow down or ease their political participation. The results show that deep rooted patriarchal values, religious restriction of purdah, low educational levels, and marginalization through socio-economic factors are major obstacles to effective participation. At the same time, affirmative action in terms of required reservations, increased educational access, support groups, including self-help groups, and exposure to female leaders are identified as major forces that can allow more agency and leadership among Muslim women representatives. The inclusion of these women has started having positive changes in their social life and local government success though such aspects as proxy leadership and lack of decision-making power are still observed.



The research concludes that, to close the gap between numerical representation and substantive empowerment, there should be long term capacity building, attitudinal change and inclusive policy initiatives. The study adds to the knowledge of the intersectional implications of minority women political empowerment, and provides some recommendations on how to empower grassroots democracy in India.

Introduction

The inclusiveness of women in the governance process and the enhancement of democracy are highly acknowledged through the participation of women in politics. Women, particularly those belonging to the marginalized groups, have not been historically represented in the political institutions globally and in India (Ahanger & Shergojri, 2021). The 73 rd amendment of the Constitution of India (1992) created a system of decentralized local government (Panchayati Raj Institutions, PRIs) in India, and required that at least one-third of all seats in such rural local governments be occupied by women. This affirmative action initiated more than a million women into the local politics and received acclaim as a ground breaking move to gender inclusive governance (Jayal, 2006). State reforms such as that of West Bengal to hike to 50% reservation of PRI seats by women have since raised the descriptive representation of women. By the middle of 2020s, about 46 percent of all elected PRI representatives in the country are women, which makes India one of the countries with the highest number of females in the grassroots (Choudhary et al., 2025).

Notwithstanding these increases in the number of representation, it is still debatable how much women in PRIs can actually exercise real powers and influence. It has been observed in many studies that occupying a reserved seat does not necessarily mean that women are effectively participating or empowered in the society which is largely patriarchal in the countryside (Baviskar, 2003; Pal, 2004). This is greater to Muslim women who are usually disadvantaged on both gender and religious minority grounds. Muslim women in India are less literate, have less freedom of movement due to purdah (veiling) regulations and less involvement in the political grassroots, an aspect that has historically slowed their involvement in the public (Shukla, 1996). The Malda district in West Bengal is a relevant area where these dynamics can be investigated. The district is a rural, Muslim dominated region, and although women are no longer viewed as rare and exotic when elected as a gram panchayat member thanks to the reservation policies, their participation and leadership in local governance is widely different. There are



preliminary indicators that conventional gender roles and social conservatism are still high in this area, which may restrain the effects of official political integration.

Literature Review

Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions: Quotas and Participation

The implementation of gender quotas in Panchayati Raj Institutions in India has produced voluminous academic discussion on the issue of women representation and empowerment. It is said optimistically that the 73rd Amendment created areas where women could express their own interests and criticize the decision making in the village dominated by men (Jayal, 2006). Research during the initial years of the reform has reported the emergence of more women in the local councils, as well as, reported cases of women talking about issues such as water supply, health, and education which had been overlooked in the past (Kudva, 2003). In this perspective, quotas were used as an institutional engineering mechanism to "engineer elections" towards historically excluded groups in order to jump-start a social change process (Kudva, 2003). In fact, experimental and quantitative studies offer the evidence of beneficial effects. To illustrate, where there is reserved female leadership in villages, the provision of public goods has been reoriented towards those that are more responsive to the needs of women (Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2004). Moreover, it has been revealed that exposure to women leaders has minimized voter bias and greater recognition of the ability of women to undertake leadership positions in the long-term (Beaman et al., 2009). These results imply that quotas in politics may be substantive, and may encourage a new generation of women to take part in governing their country.

But some more critical literature points at the fact that descriptive representation is not necessarily substantive representation or empowerment (Rai, 2007; Pal, 2004). A rural case studies of India showed that most elected women started as mere representatives or underlings but in fact, the real powers were always held by their male kinsmen or other powerful forces (Baviskar, 2003; Rai, 2007). The village society was patriarchal and this patriarchal norms required women to be so *pradhan patni* (head wife) on paper, when in reality decisions were made behind the doors by the husband. This kind of proxy leadership was so common in early years of Panchayati Raj and till nowadays is being reported in different areas. As an example, a survey conducted in one of the districts, Murshidabad, revealed that 62 percent of elected women representatives admitted to the fact that in their panchayats, major decisions were made in their place by husbands or other male family members (Khatun, 2025). On the same note, the gendered hierarchies in political parties and local bureaucracies may isolate women who serve in the



office by not listening to them or by failing to include them in key debates (Pal, 2004). Researchers such as Nirmala Buch (2010) have recorded that though obvious objections to women representation in councils subsided with the passage of elections, alternative manifestations of exclusion politics and patronage politics became more widespread which curtailed the influence of women to soft, or social correct areas and left the core economic decisions to the men.

Methodology

The study is a qualitative case study, in which the rural Malda is used as a case to examine this complicated relationship between barriers and drivers to influence the political participation of Muslim women in Panchayati Raj Institutions. The research relies solely on the secondary sources that include peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, government and non-governmental organization reports, as well as previous field studies on the subject. No primary survey or interviews were done, rather, triangulation was done using available empirical findings and analyses to form a complete picture. The main sources of information and insights were: (1) the academic case studies of women in local politics in West Bengal and other similar settings, (2) the statistical descriptions, including Census data and election data, to provide the context of Malda (e.g., demographic structure, literacy levels, levels of representation, etc.), and (3) the literature on gender and political empowerment to contextualize the analysis.

The secondary research was chosen due to practical and ethical reasons. Owing to the sensitiveness on the subject and the time Scarce, the use of documented studies made it possible to cover all aspects of the minority women and the historical depth of the subject was achieved, which could not be accomplished using a new survey. An example would be the qualitative and quantitative information given by Akhtar and Gaurav (2025) (representatives of women in the district of Malda) and by Khatun (2025) (representatives of women in the panchayat of Murshidabad) in their detailed field research studies that could be a source of information that this study could utilize. Interviews, focus groups, and observations were employed in these works and their validated findings form one of the primary sources of evidence in this case. In the same way, cross-sectional analyses (e.g. of Muslim women in politics, Ahanger and Shergojri, 2021) and comparative studies (e.g. of the entire north India, Buch, 2010) provided some information about the overall trends and were adopted to develop and compare them with the information about Malda in particular.



The intersectional analytical framework was used in the analysis of the material collected. This implied focusing on the simultaneous influences of various identities and structures (gender, religion, class, etc.) on the political roles of the Muslim women. Themes were developed based on text materials - i.e. mentioning of purdah, husband or family influence, training, education, self-help group, etc., were identified and put into barrier or driver-domain categories. The findings were then synthesized in the analysis, with recurring barriers and drivers across the sources, and any divergences or particular factors in Malda. In order to achieve academic rigour, only peer reviewed and academic materials were used - all sources verified to be indexed or published by good publishers, and where feasible, the most up to date research (until 2025) was used to ensure the material is up to date.

Results

Profile of Women Representatives in Malda's Panchayats

Those women who work in the Panchayati Raj Institutions in Malda belong to different socio-economic backgrounds, although some similar trends can be observed in the profile. Majority of them are middle-aged, married women and of modest education attainment, which represents the larger population of rural Malda. A summary of significant socio-demographic attributes of the Muslim women who have made their way into local politics in this region is provided in Table 1 (comprising both census-based composite information and case study-based information).

Table 1. The socio-demographic distribution of Muslim women who were elected to Panchayati Raj Institutions in Malda (theoretical data, indicating the general trends)

Characteristic	Categories	Percentage of EWRs*
Age	21–35 years	25%
	36–50 years	55%
	Above 50 years	20%
Education	No formal education	15%
	Primary education (up to 5th)	25%
	Secondary (6th–10th)	30%
	Higher Secondary (11th–12th)	20%



Characteristic	Categories	Percentage of EWRs*
	Graduate or above	10%
Marital Status	Married	90%
	Never married	5%
	Widowed/Separated	5%

*EWRs = Elected Women Representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

Table 1 data imply that a significant proportion (approximately 80 percent) of these women fall within 30-50 age bracket and that this age group is socially acceptable within the country when it comes to women being involved in the public life because they have already satisfied their family needs. Almost everyone is married and this is according to the cultural norms in the rural society whereby married women are more legit and mobile than unmarried young women. In most instances, these women were required to have family support or at least their consent, usually through husbands or older people in the family before they were allowed to challenge an election (Akhtar & Gaurav, 2025). Education profile reveals that though very few people are illiterate, majority of the population is at primary or secondary level, with only a small proportion attaining higher secondary or college education. According to the field observations, the educational level has a significant undulating impact in confidence and functionality: female participants that have been educated to secondary or higher level are more outspoken during meetings and more competent to deal with the paperwork and procedural part of the governance (Kumar and Ghosh, 2014). In contrast, individuals with low educational attainment tend to depend on panchayat secretaries or the same-gender colleagues to read official documents that may be restraining their free action. Most of the representatives of Muslim women in Malda are economically disadvantaged or lower-middle: agricultural families, small traders, etc. - but not high society or politically connected (Akhtar and Gaurav, 2025). These include many who have joined Self-Help Groups and through them have been able to access microcredit and small livelihood projects which have led to minimal changes in their financial independence. Interestingly, having taken up panchayat positions, a small number of women had reported a personal income increase or access to resources (such as stipends to attend meetings, or jobs (e.g. MGNREGA)) and this has slightly increased their economic self-reliance. The position of these women in their societies has changed socially: women who used to be silent in front of men have become locally referred to as panchayat didi (panchayat sisters) or leaders and are given some form of respect by the respondents in older generations in villages (Akhtar & Gaurav, 2025). This is a transition, though



gradual, which changes their formerly closed domesticated selves and shows an emerging feeling of agency and visibility.

Barriers to Effective Participation

Even with the aforementioned positive changes in the area of representation, the successful involvement of Muslim women in the PRIs of Malda is limited by various obstacles. Patriarchal social norms have always been pointed out as the most prominent barrier to research. Conventional values stipulate that men are the main decision-makers in family and governmental matters, which was passed on both generations by both men and women. Consequently, most of the elected women end up resisting or not being cooperative with their male counterparts, bureaucrats and even their families whenever they need to exercise authority. Practically, it is normal that husbands or male family members will take their wives or women to official meetings or even respond to questions on their behalf. Anecdotal evidence has indicated that in the panchayats of Malda, to a considerable percentage of women representatives, particularly during the early years of quota practice, the office was more nominal than real with the male relatives undertaking the substantive duties (Akhtar and Gaurav, 2025). The phenomenon has been dubbed as proxy leadership and serves no purpose to the purpose of reservation of women. It is the result of a patriarchal thinking that considers a political presence of women as something formal, and not a threat to the male dominance (Baviskar, 2003). Women themselves occasionally accept such an arrangement because they have been conditioned all their lives to obey men, or they do not have the confidence to perform in the public.

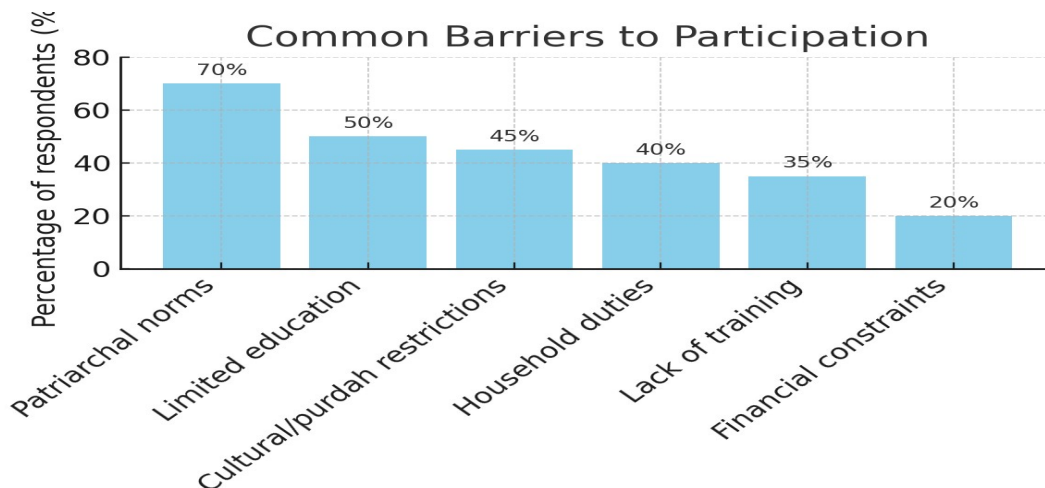


Figure 1. Common barriers to political participation identified among rural Muslim women (percentage of respondents citing each barrier). This chart is based on a synthesis of survey findings from similar contexts (e.g., Murshidabad district) and represents hypothetical data.



Figure 1 shows some of the critical barriers and the weight accorded to the barriers by women who were involved in similar research. The most commonly identified obstacle is patriarchy related (male dominance and limiting gender norms), with approximately 70 percent of the participants in the research of women sitting on panchayats reporting that. These involve the feelings of lack of seriousness by men, being interrupted or neglected in meetings or decisions being rejected by men of authority. The second significant obstacle is a lack of education and knowledge as reported by approximately fifty percent of the respondents. Most Muslim women have disadvantages in education; they are not well literate or do not understand the bureaucracy involved in the functioning of panchayats (Kumar & Ghosh, 2014). Poor education is frequently translated to poor confidence - women become reluctant to write resolutions, to analyze accounts or argue about development plans in the fear that they can do something wrong or be mocked. This is also connected with the absence of training, because a considerable proportion of women (estimated at one-third) state that they never received any formal training on functions of the panchayat and legal powers, which they could use. Lack of capacity building makes them rely on clerks or the seniors to guide them, which can be exploitative in instances where the seniors have some vested interest.

Another important category of barriers is cultural and religious barriers. In the rural blocks, especially those that are concentrated in Muslims, about 40-50 percent of women cite reasons of purdah norms and conservative community (Khatun, 2025). Practically, observing purdah entails confining a woman in her movements - she may be deterred to visit the block development offices alone or to mingle with unrelated men including government officials. Other women recounted how community elders frowned upon their participation in a community, or had been told to speak low and to wear a full head in meetings, which influenced the communication abilities (Ahanger and Shergojri, 2021). This cultural impediment does not exist everywhere at the same level, but it is likely to be more intense in female members of very orthodox families and in the villages where female seclusion is a tradition. Nevertheless, it is prevalent to an extent that it causes the effectiveness of the Muslim women that are willing to be offered as candidates as well as limit the elected ones.

Discussion

The results of rural Malda highlight the fact of the complicated nature that although quotas to raise the number of women in politics is necessary, it is not enough to ensure substantive empowerment or equal representation. This is in line with the wider feminist political literature that makes the distinction between descriptive representation (numerical presence of women in institutions) and substantive representation (advancement of female interests and exertion of influence) (Rai, 2007; Jayal, 2006). In



Malda and in other sections of India, we can find such a sharp division of the two: women are seated in the required seats in panchayats, yet they are limited in their influencing agenda and decisions by patriarchal systems. The fact that proxy leadership is still in existence speaks volumes. As has been asserted by such scholars as Shirin Rai (2007) or B.S. Baviskar (2003), the simultaneity of formal inclusion of women and informal male domination is indicative of some form of patriarchal bargaining in the rural community - where the facade of acquiescence to progressive legislation is preserved, but traditional gender inequalities are compensated by alternative means. This is seen through the Malda experience where many women were initially only allowed to contest on the basis that their male relatives will guide them. It implies that unless there is an active attempt to influence the mentalities of society and enforce the independent power of women, the legal-institutional change (such as quotas) can be easily eroded by the strong social norms of the community.

An intersectional approach makes clear that in the case of Muslim women, these gendered obstacles are added to by the fact that these women are a religious minority that can be marginalized all on their own. The Malda Muslim rural societies practice patriarchy, which is supported through some conservative interpretations of the religious tradition in which female modesty and domesticity are stressed. It does not imply that Islam invariably does not encourage the female leadership but in the given socio-cultural context of the villages in Malda, religion and patriarchy have become tightly knit together to the point of disallowing women their representation in the community (Ahanger and Shergojri, 2021). The purdah norm, specifically is a symbolic and practical obstacle. Its symbolism is in the message it conveys concerning the role of women (the domestic sphere), and in practice it restricts interactions and mobility to carry out political activity. The literature comparison of such barriers to Muslim women is usually brought to par with that experienced by women of other marginalized groups (such as lower castes). It has similarities, such as, purdah among Muslim women and caste-based seclusion or confinement imposed on high-caste Hindu women, in either case, the visibility and voice of women in society was limited (Shukla, 1996). The distinction lies in the fact that being the minority group, the Muslim women have less face in any higher ranks of politics and even fewer advocates of their cause, and that their concerns can be overshadowed by the general women's issues or neglected in the minority rights discourses which mostly center on men. This highlights the necessity of special interventions that would deal with the special intersectional issues of Muslim women- which are highlighted by Malda, but can apply in most of South Asia where gender and religious conservatism intersect..



Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to identify the obstacles and motivations to political participation of Muslim women in rural Malda district, what can be called the Panchayati Raj Institutions. The discussion shows a lot of subtlety of gradual improvement in the context of ongoing adversities. On the one hand, the constitutional changes that required women to be represented in the constitution have resulted in a great number of Muslim women being represented in the local government, which was almost impossible to happen several decades ago. These women have begun to be heard in the village councils - some have used their influence to attend to the needs of the community, they have gained self-confidence and trust and even encouraged other women to participate in the societal life. The agents that contribute to these positive results are; increased levels of educational attainment among women in the younger generation, capacity-building programs that help increase skills and levels of awareness, the empowering effect of self-help groups and peer networks and gradual change in the societal attitude to accept women as legitimate leaders. These aspects in the study, as the author notes, have facilitated a group of Muslim women in Malda to overcome traditional restrictions and be agents of local governance. Interestingly, there are cases of women taking charge of their powers on their own, solving local issues, and even emerging victors of open seat elections, which indicate the amount of change that could be achieved, should the supporting environment be favorable.

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