

Psychological and Political Determinants of Political Participation among Muslim Women in India: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

Background: Muslim women in India face unique challenges in political participation due to their intersectional identity as both women and religious minorities. Despite constituting approximately 7% of India's population, they remain severely underrepresented in political institutions and processes. **Objective:** This systematic review examines the psychological and political factors that influence political participation among Muslim women in India, synthesizing existing research to identify key barriers and facilitators. **Methods:** Following PRISMA guidelines, we conducted a systematic search of eight databases (PubMed, JSTOR, Google Scholar, ProQuest, SAGE, Taylor & Francis and Shodhganga) for peer-reviewed studies published between January 2010 and December 2024. Search terms included combinations of "Muslim women," "political participation," "India," "electoral behavior," "political efficacy," and "intersectionality." **Results:** From 847 initial records, 34 studies met inclusion criteria after systematic screening, encompassing 52,847 participants across 18 Indian states and union territories. The review identified six primary determinants: (1) Political efficacy deficits among Muslim women compared to other demographic groups; (2) Complex identity negotiations between religious, gender, and citizenship identities; (3) Critical role of family and social support systems; (4) Structural barriers including economic marginalization and educational disadvantages; (5) Systematic exclusion by political parties; and (6) Alternative participation through social movements and community organizing. **Conclusions:** Muslim women's political participation is determined by intersecting psychological, social, and structural factors requiring multi-level interventions. Evidence suggests that targeted strategies addressing both individual-level barriers and systemic discrimination can enhance democratic inclusion.

Keywords: *Muslim women, political participation, India, democracy, intersectionality, political efficacy, systematic review*

Political participation constitutes the cornerstone of democratic governance, encompassing diverse activities through which citizens influence political decisions and outcomes (Verba & Nie, 1972). Research on political participation has evolved to recognize the importance of resource-based models that consider not just socioeconomic status but also civic skills, political engagement, and mobilization networks (Brady, Verba, &

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Schlozman, 1995). In India's democratic framework, Muslim women experience what scholars term "multiple marginalization"—exclusion based on the intersection of gender, religious minority status, and often socioeconomic disadvantage (Hasan, 2004).

The historical context of communal relations in India has shaped contemporary political dynamics, with scholars documenting how communal violence and polarization create additional barriers to minority political participation (Brass, 2003). The quantitative reality of this exclusion is stark. Muslim women comprise approximately 95 million individuals (7.2% of India's population according to Census 2011), yet their representation in formal political institutions remains critically low. As of the 17th Lok Sabha (2019-2024), only 5 out of 543 Members of Parliament are Muslim women, representing less than 1% of the lower house. At the state level, Muslim women hold approximately 2.1% of assembly seats across Indian states, with significant interstate variation ranging from 5.8% in Kerala to 0.3% in Uttar Pradesh (Election Commission of India, 2024).

Contemporary scholarship on women's political representation in India has demonstrated that descriptive representation can lead to substantive policy changes, particularly when women legislators focus on issues affecting women and marginalized communities (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). However, this research has primarily focused on Hindu women in reserved constituencies, with limited attention to the specific barriers facing Muslim women.

This underrepresentation extends beyond electoral office to encompass political party leadership, local governance structures, and civil society organizations. In the current composition of major national political parties, Muslim women constitute less than 0.8% of senior leadership positions, despite parties' rhetorical commitments to diversity and inclusion (Association for Democratic Reforms, 2023).

Contemporary events have, however, illuminated Muslim women's latent political agency. The anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests centered at Shaheen Bagh (2019-2020) witnessed unprecedented mobilization of Muslim women, particularly elderly women who emerged as protest leaders and political symbols (Bhatia, 2020). Similarly, legal debates surrounding Triple Talaq legislation and the Uniform Civil Code have positioned Muslim women at the center of political discourse, though frequently without their meaningful participation in policy formulation processes (Parashar, 2013).

This systematic review examines the psychological and political determinants of political participation among Muslim women in India. By synthesizing existing empirical research, we aim to identify evidence-based factors that either facilitate or constrain their political engagement, ultimately providing a foundation for targeted interventions to enhance democratic inclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Context of Muslim Women's Rights

The evolution of Muslim women's rights in India must be understood within the broader context of Islamic jurisprudence and reform movements. Islamic feminist scholars have long argued that many restrictions on women's political participation stem from cultural interpretations rather than core religious principles (Engineer, 2008). Contemporary Islamic feminist scholarship challenges Western feminist assumptions about Muslim women's agency, arguing for understanding women's choices within their own cultural and religious

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contexts (Mahmood, 2005). This perspective is crucial for understanding how Muslim women in India navigate between religious identity and political participation.

Contemporary Research on Muslim Women in India

Recent ethnographic research has revealed the complex ways Muslim women in urban India negotiate their identities while engaging with political and social issues (Kirmani, 2013). These studies demonstrate that Muslim women are not passive recipients of patriarchal control but active agents who strategically navigate multiple forms of constraint and opportunity.

Research on Muslim political representation in India shows declining trends in electoral success and political inclusion since the 1980s (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2020). This broader pattern of Muslim political marginalization creates additional challenges for Muslim women seeking political roles.

The representation of women in the Indian Parliament has been extensively studied, revealing both progress and persistent barriers (Rai & Spary, 2019). However, this research highlights how intersectional identities create compound disadvantages that are not addressed by gender-focused interventions alone.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptualizing Political Participation

Political participation encompasses a broad spectrum of activities through which citizens engage with political processes. Following Verba and Nie's (1972) seminal framework, we distinguish between:

- **Conventional participation:** Voting, campaigning, party membership, contacting officials
- **Unconventional participation:** Protests, demonstrations, boycotts, civil disobedience
- **Digital participation:** Online activism, social media engagement, e-petitioning

For marginalized communities, participation often occurs through what Scott (1985) terms "hidden transcripts"—informal political activities that may not be captured by traditional measures of political engagement.

Intersectionality Theory

Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality framework provides the primary theoretical lens for understanding Muslim women's political experiences. Rather than experiencing simple additive effects of gender and religious discrimination, Muslim women face unique forms of marginalization emerging from the intersection of these identities. This intersectional approach reveals how traditional single-axis analyses fail to capture the complexity of their political exclusion (McCall, 2005).

Political Efficacy Theory

Political efficacy—citizens' beliefs about their capacity to influence political outcomes—serves as a crucial mediator between individual characteristics and political participation (Campbell et al., 1954). We distinguish between:

- *Internal efficacy:* Confidence in one's ability to understand and participate in politics
- *External efficacy:* Belief that political institutions are responsive to citizen input

Research consistently demonstrates strong correlations between political efficacy and various forms of political participation (Valentino et al., 2009).

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Social Identity Theory

Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory illuminates how group membership affects political behavior. For Muslim women, managing multiple, sometimes conflicting social identities (religious, gender, national) creates particular challenges for political engagement.

Political Opportunity Structure

This framework examines how institutional arrangements, political alignments, and policy contexts create varying opportunities for political mobilization (Tarrow, 1994). For Muslim women, political opportunity structures are shaped by both gender-based and religion-based institutional arrangements.

Feminist Political Theory and Representation

The politics of presence versus the politics of ideas remains a central debate in feminist political theory (Phillips, 1995). This debate is particularly relevant for understanding Muslim women's political representation, as questions arise about whether Muslim women can only be authentically represented by other Muslim women, or whether substantive representation of their interests can occur through other representatives (Mansbridge, 1999).

Inclusive democratic theory emphasizes the importance of ensuring that all affected groups have meaningful opportunities to participate in political processes (Young, 2000). This framework highlights how systemic exclusion of groups like Muslim women undermines the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic governance.

METHODOLOGY

Search Strategy

We conducted a comprehensive systematic search following PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. Eight databases were searched for studies published between January 1, 2010, and December 31, 2024:

International Databases: PubMed/MEDLINE, JSTOR, Google Scholar, ProQuest Political Science Database

Regional Databases: SAGE India, Taylor & Francis India, Shodhganga (Indian theses repository)

Search Terms:

We used Boolean combinations of the following terms:

- ("Muslim women" OR "Muslim female*")
- AND ("political participation" OR "electoral behavior" OR "voting" OR "political engagement" OR "political activism")
- AND ("India" OR "Indian")
- Additional psychological terms: ("political efficacy" OR "political confidence" OR "political identity")

We supplemented our primary search with economic data from the National Sample Survey Office's Periodic Labour Force Survey (2017-18) to provide contextual information about Muslim women's economic participation rates and their relationship to political engagement.

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Study Selection Criteria

Inclusion Criteria:

- Empirical studies focusing on Muslim women in India
- Examination of political participation or related political behaviors
- Inclusion of psychological, attitudinal, or behavioral variables
- Peer-reviewed publications in English or Hindi
- Publication period: 2010-2024
- Quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods designs

Exclusion Criteria:

- Opinion pieces, editorials, or theoretical papers without empirical data
- Studies not disaggregating results by gender or religion
- Conference abstracts without full papers
- Studies focusing exclusively on non-Indian contexts
- Duplicate publications of the same data

Data Extraction and Quality Assessment

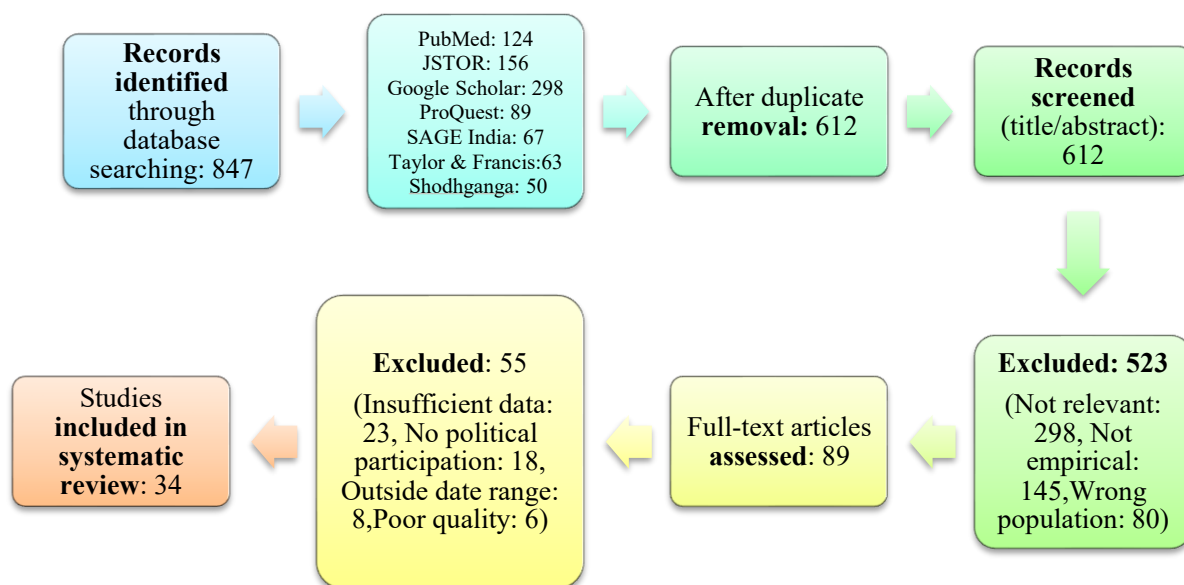
Title and abstract screening was conducted independently by two reviewers using predetermined criteria. Full-text screening was performed for potentially eligible studies, with disagreements resolved through discussion and consensus.

For each included study, we extracted:

- Study characteristics (design, sample size, location)
- Participant demographics
- Measures of political participation
- Psychological and political variables
- Key findings and effect sizes where available

Quality was assessed using appropriate tools for different study designs: Newcastle-Ottawa Scale for observational studies and CASP checklists for qualitative research.

PRISMA Flow Diagram



RESULTS

Study Characteristics

The final sample comprised 34 studies with a total of 52,847 participants across 18 Indian states and union territories. Study designs included:

- Quantitative surveys: 16 studies (47%)
- Qualitative studies: 10 studies (29%)
- Mixed-methods studies: 6 studies (18%)
- Secondary data analyses: 2 studies (6%)

Geographic distribution showed concentration in: Uttar Pradesh (26% of studies), West Bengal (18%), Kerala (15%), Delhi (12%), with remaining studies distributed across other states.

Primary Determinants of Political Participation

Political Efficacy and Confidence Deficits

Studies consistently documented reduced political efficacy among Muslim women compared to other demographic groups. This manifested in lower confidence regarding their ability to understand political processes and greater skepticism about government responsiveness. Educational attainment moderated but did not eliminate these disparities, suggesting factors beyond individual capabilities influenced the confidence gap.

Qualitative findings revealed recurring themes of political alienation, with participants expressing beliefs that politics was "not meant for people like us" or viewing political engagement as incompatible with their values. This psychological barrier creates a self-reinforcing cycle where reduced confidence leads to lower participation, further reinforcing perceptions of political ineffectiveness.

Identity Navigation and Integration Complexities

The relationship between religious identity and political participation proved complex rather than linear. Moderate religious identification often correlated with higher political engagement than very high or very low religious commitment. Women who successfully integrated religious identity with civic participation demonstrated higher political efficacy and sustained engagement.

Generational differences were significant, with younger Muslim women more likely to view religious identity as compatible with political activism. This identity integration often involved reframing political participation as consistent with religious values of social justice and community welfare.

Family and Social Support Systems

Family support emerged as a critical determinant of political participation, often outweighing individual factors like education or income. Spousal and parental support significantly increased engagement likelihood, while opposition from extended family members, particularly mothers-in-law, created substantial barriers.

Community-based women's groups provided alternative support systems that could compensate for family constraints. Economic independence emerged as a crucial moderating factor, with financially autonomous women showing reduced sensitivity to family disapproval, providing both means and social leverage for participation.

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Structural Inequalities and Systemic Barriers

Educational and economic disadvantages created cascading effects limiting political participation opportunities. These disparities affected political knowledge, social networks, and exposure to political information. Geographic factors also played important roles, with rural women facing additional challenges related to transportation and access to political events.

The intersection of gender, religious minority status, and often economically disadvantaged location created compound barriers requiring comprehensive, multi-level interventions rather than single-focus solutions.

Political Party Exclusion and Gatekeeping

Analysis revealed systematic exclusion of Muslim women from formal political opportunities through minimal representation in candidate lists, leadership positions, and decision-making roles. When inclusion occurred, it often took tokenistic forms without meaningful authority over policy decisions.

These gatekeeping mechanisms operated through both explicit and implicit bias, with electoral viability concerns often masking deeper prejudices. This institutional exclusion reinforced psychological barriers by limiting role models and demonstrating system unresponsiveness.

Alternative Political Engagement Pathways

Despite significant barriers to formal political participation, studies documented considerable engagement in alternative forms of political expression. Community organizing, issue-based campaigns, and protest participation often exceeded rates for conventional political activities, suggesting latent political interest and capacity that formal institutions failed to recognize or channel effectively.

The anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests of 2019-2020 represented a notable inflection point, demonstrating unprecedented political mobilization among Muslim women, particularly elderly women who emerged as protest leaders. Post-protest surveys indicated increased political consciousness and engagement among participants, suggesting that appropriate catalysts and supportive contexts could overcome traditional barriers to participation.

Regional and Contextual Variations

Significant variations emerged across different states and regions, reflecting diverse political cultures, historical experiences, and socioeconomic conditions. States with stronger traditions of inclusive politics and higher female literacy rates generally showed better outcomes for Muslim women's political participation. Conversely, regions experiencing recent communal tensions or maintaining more traditional social structures presented greater barriers to political engagement.

Urban-rural differences were pronounced, with urban Muslim women generally reporting higher participation rates and political efficacy. However, this pattern varied significantly based on local political contexts, the availability of supportive institutions and networks, and regional political cultures that either facilitated or constrained women's public participation.

DISCUSSION

Interpreting the Intersectional Reality

This systematic review demonstrates that Muslim women's political participation cannot be understood through single-variable analyses but requires examining how psychological, social, and structural factors interact at the intersection of gender and religious minority identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Their political exclusion represents what Hancock (2007) terms "multiplicative" rather than "additive" discrimination effects.

The Political Efficacy Paradox

The finding of persistently low political efficacy among Muslim women, even when controlling for education and socioeconomic status, suggests that psychological barriers may be more entrenched than previously understood. This efficacy deficit appears to result from:

1. **Historical exclusion** creating intergenerational transmission of political alienation
2. **Contemporary discrimination** reinforcing beliefs about system unresponsiveness
3. **Stereotype threat** where awareness of negative stereotypes impairs political confidence
4. **Representation gaps** limiting available role models and political schemas

Beyond Electoral Politics: Redefining Participation

The pronounced engagement in alternative political forms suggests that traditional measures of political participation may systematically underestimate Muslim women's political agency. Their higher rates of protest participation and community organizing indicate political interest and capacity that formal institutions fail to channel effectively.

This pattern aligns with theories of "everyday resistance" (Scott, 1985) and suggests that exclusion from formal politics may actually increase engagement in contentious politics—a finding with implications for both democratic inclusion and social stability.

Social Movement Participation and Alternative Politics

Recent scholarship on citizenship and belonging has examined how the CAA protests represented a broader struggle over the meaning of Indian citizenship (Sabah, 2022). The prominence of Muslim women in these protests challenged both external stereotypes about their political passivity and internal community debates about appropriate women's roles.

The Shaheen Bagh Transformation

The 2019-2020 anti-CAA protests represent a potential inflection point in Muslim women's political consciousness. The emergence of elderly Muslim women as protest leaders challenged both external stereotypes about their political passivity and internal community norms about appropriate women's roles. However, the sustainability of this mobilization requires further longitudinal research.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For Political Institutions

Political Parties:

1. **Implement transparent candidate selection processes** with specific targets for Muslim women's representation
2. **Develop leadership pipelines** through mentorship and training programs rather than relying on existing networks
3. **Address implicit bias** in "winnability" assessments that systematically disadvantage minority women

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4. **Create internal party positions** specifically focused on minority women's political development

Electoral System Reforms:

1. **Consider intersectional reservations** that account for multiple marginalized identities
2. **Strengthen campaign finance regulations** to reduce economic barriers to candidacy
3. **Enhance constituency outreach** programs targeting underrepresented communities

For Civil Society and NGOs

1. **Design culturally responsive leadership programs** that work within rather than against religious frameworks
2. **Create safe political spaces** where Muslim women can develop political skills without facing community backlash
3. **Build bridges** between Muslim women's organizations and mainstream women's movements
4. **Develop political education curricula** addressing specific barriers and building efficacy

For Government Policy

1. **Adopt intersectional policy frameworks** recognizing that gender-neutral minority policies and religion-neutral women's policies both fail to address Muslim women's specific needs
2. **Strengthen educational access** through targeted scholarships, transportation support, and community-based programs
3. **Enhance economic empowerment** through skills training, microfinance, and employment generation programs sensitive to cultural considerations
4. **Monitor policy implementation** to ensure existing schemes reach Muslim women effectively

For Communities and Families

1. **Promote positive narratives** about Muslim women's political participation as compatible with religious values
2. **Highlight role models** at local, state, and national levels
3. **Build family education programs** addressing political participation as civic duty
4. **Create peer support networks** for politically interested women

For Muslim Women

1. **Start with local engagement** in community issues before advancing to formal political roles
2. **Build collective networks** with other politically interested women for mutual support and shared learning
3. **Develop political skills** through training opportunities in public speaking, organizing, and leadership
4. **Frame participation** in terms of community service and religious obligation to social justice

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Current Research Limitations

- **Geographic Concentration:** Studies were disproportionately concentrated in urban areas and specific states (UP, West Bengal, Kerala), limiting generalizability to rural and tribal contexts where Muslim women's experiences may differ significantly.
- **Socioeconomic Bias:** Middle-class and educated Muslim women were overrepresented in study samples, potentially underestimating barriers faced by economically disadvantaged women.
- **Methodological Inconsistencies:** Varied definitions of political participation across studies complicate synthesis. Some studies focused exclusively on electoral behavior while others included broader civic engagement.
- **Temporal Limitations:** The cross-sectional nature of most studies prevents establishing causal relationships between identified factors and political participation outcomes.

Priority Research Needs

- **Longitudinal Studies:** Multi-year tracking of political participation trajectories would illuminate how engagement develops over time and identify critical intervention points.
- **Intervention Research:** Rigorous evaluation of programs designed to increase Muslim women's political participation would provide evidence for effective approaches.
- **Rural and Tribal Contexts:** Expanded research in underexplored geographic and cultural contexts would enhance understanding of diversity within Muslim women's experiences.
- **Digital Politics:** Systematic examination of social media and online political engagement patterns among Muslim women, particularly younger cohorts.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Cross-national comparisons with other democracies having significant Muslim minorities could illuminate context-specific vs. universal patterns.
- **Economic Empowerment Linkages:** Research examining how economic independence affects political participation patterns among Muslim women.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review provides compelling evidence that Muslim women's political participation in India results from complex interactions among psychological, social, and structural factors. The persistent efficacy deficits, identity negotiation challenges, family dynamics, economic constraints, and institutional discrimination create multiple barriers requiring comprehensive, multi-level interventions.

However, the review also identifies significant facilitators and demonstrates Muslim women's latent political capacity. When provided with appropriate support systems, economic independence, and institutional opportunities, Muslim women do engage meaningfully in political processes. The success of alternative political engagement—from Shaheen Bagh to community organizing—reveals political agency that formal institutions have failed to recognize and channel.

The evidence suggests that enhancing Muslim women's political participation requires moving beyond simplistic solutions toward nuanced approaches that:

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- Address psychological barriers through efficacy-building interventions
- Support positive identity integration rather than forcing choices between religious and political commitments
- Strengthen family and community support systems
- Tackle structural inequalities in education, economics, and institutional access
- Reform political party practices and electoral systems

Ultimately, Muslim women's political inclusion is not merely a matter of representation or social justice—it is essential for the health and legitimacy of Indian democracy itself. A democratic system that systematically excludes 95 million citizens from meaningful political participation cannot claim to be fully representative or responsive to citizen needs.

The pathways to participation identified in this review provide evidence-based directions for policy makers, political parties, civil society organizations, and communities committed to democratic deepening. As India continues its democratic journey, ensuring Muslim women's political inclusion represents both a moral imperative and a democratic necessity.

Ethics Statement: This systematic review analyzed previously published research and did not require additional ethical approval. All included studies reported appropriate ethical clearances from their respective institutions.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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