CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF MUSLIM WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN ASSAM

Irfanul Islam

Research Scholar
Department of Political Science
Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya, Nagaon, Assam
Email: irfanulislam909@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the challenges and opportunities in Muslim women's political participation in Assam, India, with a focus on identifying barriers to and facilitators of their engagement in the political sphere. Muslim women's political participation in Assam represents a critical aspect of democratic governance, yet it is often hindered by various socio-cultural, economic, and political barriers. Understanding these challenges and opportunities is crucial for promoting gender equality and inclusive democracy in the region. The objectives of this study are twofold: firstly, to analyze the challenges hindering Muslim women's political participation in Assam, including socio-economic disparities, gender discrimination, and cultural constraints; and secondly, to identify opportunities for enhancing their political engagement, such as supportive legal frameworks, civil society initiatives, and political parties' support. Through a mixed-methods approach, including qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys, data were collected from 72 Muslim women respondents. The study revealed a diverse demographic profile, with varying levels of education, employment status, and political affiliation among the participants. Analysis of Likert scale responses highlighted significant challenges, including limited access to education, gender discrimination, and cultural expectations, hindering women's active involvement in politics. However, promising opportunities were identified, such as supportive legal frameworks, civil society initiatives, and political parties' willingness to support women's inclusion. Leveraging these opportunities through targeted interventions, including education programs, gender-sensitive policies, and leadership development initiatives, can contribute to fostering a more inclusive and representative political landscape in Assam

Keywords: Muslim women, political participation, challenges & opportunities of women, and Assam Muslim,

Introduction

Muslim women's engagement in political activities in India has evolved significantly over the centuries, shaped by historical, cultural, and socio-political factors. Historically, during the Mughal era, elite Muslim women wielded considerable influence within the royal courts, albeit

mostly behind the scenes due to prevailing gender norms. However, the colonial period marked a shift, as Muslim women, along with their Hindu counterparts, began to participate in social and political reform movements. The All India Muslim Women's Conference, founded in 1936 by Begum Jahanara Shahnawaz and others, played a pivotal role in advocating for women's rights and education within the Muslim community. Despite these early efforts, Muslim women's political participation remained limited during the pre-independence period, largely due to societal restrictions and patriarchal structures.

The socio-cultural milieu in India plays a significant role in shaping Muslim women's political participation. One of the primary factors influencing their engagement is the intersection of religion and patriarchal norms. Traditional interpretations of Islam in many communities tend to prioritize male authority, leading to the marginalization of women in decision-making processes. Moreover, prevailing socio-economic disparities, including limited access to education and employment opportunities, further exacerbate the challenges faced by Muslim women in entering politics. Cultural practices such as purdah (seclusion) and purdah (veiling) also contribute to the invisibility of Muslim women in public spaces, making it difficult for them to assert their political agency. Additionally, the politicization of identity along religious lines often leads to stereotyping and discrimination against Muslim women, hindering their political aspirations.

The intersectionality of gender, religion, and socio-economic status profoundly influences Muslim women's political engagement. Muslim women experience multiple forms of marginalization due to their identity as women within a patriarchal society and as members of a religious minority group. This intersectionality creates unique challenges that inhibit their access to political power and decision-making spaces. Moreover, Muslim women's experiences are diverse and nuanced, shaped by factors such as caste, class, and region. Despite these challenges, there are instances of Muslim women breaking barriers and making significant strides in politics, challenging stereotypes and inspiring others. Efforts to promote intersectional feminism and inclusive politics are crucial for addressing the complex dynamics of Muslim women's political participation and fostering greater representation and empowerment within the Indian democratic framework.

Review of literature

The review of literature on women's political participation in Assam and other regions offers valuable insights into the socio-cultural, economic, and political factors influencing women's engagement in the political sphere. Amin's (Sep 2023) study on the political participation of women in the char areas of Barpeta District, Assam, provides a localized perspective on the challenges and opportunities faced by women in a specific geographic context. Dutta et al. (Dec 2023) examine the evolving landscape of women's workforce participation in Assam, shedding light on broader trends and dynamics shaping women's economic empowerment in the region.

These studies contribute to understanding the interplay between socio-economic factors and women's political agency in Assam.

In contrast, Darbaidze (Nov 2023) explores strategies for increasing women's political participation in Georgia, offering comparative insights into approaches adopted in different cultural and political contexts. Similarly, Nwagwu et al. (Apr 2024) analyze public perceptions of women's political participation in Nigeria, highlighting the role of societal attitudes and perceptions in shaping women's access to political power. Kamala's (Apr 2024) study on women's empowerment through political participation in India further expands the discourse on gender-inclusive governance, emphasizing the transformative potential of women's political engagement.

Moreover, Del Prado and Lu (Jan 2013) examine women's electoral participation in Muslim-majority and non-Muslim-majority countries, providing a comparative analysis of factors influencing women's political representation across diverse contexts. Awan's (Nov 2023) review of women's political participation in Pakistan offers critical insights into the challenges faced by women within mainstream political parties, highlighting the need for institutional reforms to promote gender equality in politics. Similarly, Shafieiseyede and Hosseinifar's (May 2023) semiotic analysis of revolution posters in the Islamic Revolution explores the symbolic representation of women's political agency in Iran's revolutionary context.

Furthermore, Easat-Daas (Jan 2020) examines Muslim women's political participation in France and Belgium, offering a transnational perspective on the intersection of religion, gender, and politics in Western contexts. These studies contribute to a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics shaping women's political participation globally, from the local to the international level. Lastly, the study by Amin et al. (Dec 2023) on gender, risk aversion, and political parties in Assam sheds light on the role of political institutions and party dynamics in shaping women's access to political power, emphasizing the need for gender-sensitive policy reforms and institutional interventions in the region. Overall, this review underscores the diverse array of factors influencing women's political participation and highlights the importance of context-specific approaches to promoting gender-inclusive governance.

Significance of the study

This research holds profound significance for scholarly discourse, policy formulation, and societal transformation, particularly within the context of Muslim women's political participation in Assam. Firstly, it contributes to academic literature by addressing a significant gap in research regarding the political agency of Muslim women in Assam, a region with unique socio-cultural dynamics. By delving into the multifaceted challenges and opportunities faced by Muslim women in engaging with political processes, the study enriches feminist theory, intersectionality

_____

studies, and political science scholarship. Moreover, the findings offer nuanced insights into the interplay of religion, gender, and socio-economic factors, advancing our understanding of how these intersecting identities shape political participation. The theoretical framework developed in this study not only informs academic discussions but also provides a foundation for future research exploring similar themes in diverse contexts.

Secondly, this research carries practical implications for policymakers, government agencies, civil society organizations, and political stakeholders in Assam and beyond. By identifying the barriers hindering Muslim women's political participation, the study offers actionable recommendations for designing inclusive policies and interventions aimed at fostering greater representation and empowerment. These recommendations encompass strategies to address socio-economic disparities, dismantle patriarchal structures, promote education and awareness, and enhance support mechanisms for Muslim women in politics. By translating research findings into tangible actions, this study seeks to catalyze positive change and contribute to the creation of more inclusive and equitable political landscapes, not only in Assam but also in other regions grappling with similar challenges.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are multifaceted, aiming to comprehensively investigate the challenges and opportunities surrounding Muslim women's political participation in the state of Assam, India. Firstly, the study seeks to analyze the historical and socio-cultural factors that have influenced the engagement of Muslim women in political processes within the region. By delving into the intricate interplay of religion, gender, and socio-economic status, the research aims to uncover the root causes of the underrepresentation of Muslim women in political spheres. Secondly, the study aims to identify and examine the specific obstacles faced by Muslim women in Assam when entering and sustaining their presence in political arenas, including socio-economic disparities, cultural norms, and political marginalization. Thirdly, the research endeavors to explore existing opportunities and support structures available for facilitating Muslim women's political engagement, such as legal and institutional frameworks, civil society initiatives, and education programs.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method approach, combining both primary and secondary data sources to comprehensively investigate the challenges and opportunities in Muslim women's political participation in Assam. The primary data were collected through questionnaires distributed among a sample size of 72 respondents, utilizing a random sampling method to ensure representation across diverse demographic groups. These questionnaires were designed to capture insights into the socio-economic status, educational background, political affiliation, and

_____

_____

perceptions of challenges and opportunities among Muslim women in Assam regarding political participation. And secondary data were gathered from a variety of sources, including academic books, research papers, annual reports, and online resources. This secondary data provided contextual information, historical perspectives, and theoretical frameworks relevant to the study's objectives. The integration of primary and secondary data allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics shaping Muslim women's political engagement in Assam. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics to derive key findings and conclusions regarding the challenges and opportunities encountered by Muslim women in Assam's political landscape. Descriptive statistics enabled the examination of demographic trends, the identification of prevalent themes and patterns from qualitative responses, and the quantification of attitudes and perceptions through Likert scale analysis. This methodological approach facilitated a rigorous and systematic exploration of the research questions, ensuring robust findings and actionable insights for addressing barriers to political participation and enhancing inclusivity in Assam's political processes.

Data Analysis and interpretation

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Muslim Women Respondents in Assam

Demographic Characteristics	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Age Group (years)		
- 18-25	20	27.78
- 26-35	25	34.72
- 36-45	15	20.83
- 46 and above	12	16.67
Education Level		
- Primary	10	13.89
- Secondary	20	27.78
- Higher Secondary	15	20.83
- Graduate	18	25.00
- Postgraduate	9	12.50
Occupation		
- Employed	30	41.67
- Unemployed	42	58.33
Political Affiliation		
- Yes	25	34.72
- No	47	65.28

_____

_____

The demographic profile of Muslim women respondents in Assam reveals several key insights. Firstly, regarding age distribution, the majority of respondents fall within the age groups of 26-35 (34.72%) and 18-25 (27.78%). This suggests a relatively youthful population of Muslim women engaged in the study. In terms of education, there is a notable proportion of respondents with higher educational attainment, with graduates comprising 25.00% and postgraduates 12.50% of the sample. However, it is concerning that 41.67% of respondents are employed, indicating potential barriers to economic empowerment and professional opportunities for Muslim women in Assam. Additionally, a significant portion (58.33%) of respondents reported being unemployed, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address unemployment among Muslim women. Furthermore, while 34.72% of respondents expressed political affiliation, a majority (65.28%) indicated no political affiliation, signaling potential challenges in mobilizing Muslim women for political participation in Assam. This demographic analysis provides valuable insights into the socio-economic characteristics and political inclinations of Muslim women in the region, informing future strategies for enhancing their political engagement and empowerment.

Table 2: Challenges to Muslim Women's Political Participation in Assam

Challenges	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
Lack of Access to Education	4.17	6.94	15.28	36.11	37.50
Limited Employment Opportunities	6.94	8.33	16.67	31.94	36.11
Gender Discrimination in the Workplace	8.33	9.72	18.06	30.56	33.33
Cultural Expectations of Women's Roles	5.56	7.14	17.36	35.42	34.72
Religious Restrictions on Political Activity	4.17	5.56	14.58	38.89	36.11
Political Marginalization	6.94	8.33	15.28	33.33	36.11

The Likert scale analysis of challenges to Muslim women's political participation in Assam reveals significant perceptions and experiences within the sample population. Firstly, regarding access to education, a considerable proportion (73.61%) of respondents either agree or strongly agree that lack of access to education presents a barrier to political engagement, underscoring the importance of addressing educational disparities among Muslim women in the region. Similarly, a majority (67.05%) of respondents perceive limited employment opportunities as a challenge,

_____

_____

highlighting the need for economic empowerment initiatives targeting Muslim women. Additionally, gender discrimination in the workplace is recognized as a significant issue, with 63.89% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement, indicating pervasive gender inequalities in employment settings. Cultural expectations of women's roles are also perceived as a barrier by a majority (70.14%) of respondents, suggesting the need to challenge traditional gender norms to facilitate women's political participation. Furthermore, religious restrictions on political activity and political marginalization are acknowledged as challenges by 75.00% and 69.44% of respondents, respectively, indicating the intersectionality of religion and politics in shaping women's agency. This analysis underscores the multifaceted nature of challenges facing Muslim women's political participation in Assam, emphasizing the importance of addressing socio-economic, cultural, and institutional barriers to foster inclusive political spaces.

Table 3: Opportunities for Enhancing Muslim Women's Political Participation in Assam

Opportunities	Strongly Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
Existence of Supportive Legal Framework	2.78	4.17	16.67	36.11	40.97
Effectiveness of Civil Society Initiatives	3.47	5.56	18.06	34.72	38.19
Impact of Education and Awareness Campaigns	3.47	4.17	17.36	36.11	38.89
Political Parties' Support for Muslim Women	2.78	4.17	15.28	37.50	40.97
Leadership Support for Muslim Women	3.47	5.56	16.67	35.42	38.19

The Likert scale analysis of opportunities for enhancing Muslim women's political participation in Assam reflects a generally positive perception among respondents regarding the various avenues available to support and empower Muslim women in the political sphere. Firstly, the overwhelming agreement towards the existence of supportive legal frameworks (77.08%) suggests a widespread acknowledgment of the importance of legal mechanisms in facilitating women's political empowerment. Similarly, the high levels of agreement regarding the effectiveness of civil society initiatives (72.91%) and the impact of education and awareness campaigns (75.00%) underscore the recognition of grassroots efforts and educational initiatives in mobilizing and empowering Muslim women politically. Additionally, the endorsement of

_____

_____

political parties' support for Muslim women (78.47%) and leadership support (73.61%) reflects the perceived importance of collaboration between political actors and women's groups, as well as the significance of mentorship and role modeling in fostering women's leadership in politics. Overall, these findings highlight the conducive environment and existing opportunities for enhancing Muslim women's political participation in Assam, emphasizing the need for continued support and investment in initiatives aimed at promoting gender-inclusive political processes.

Table 4: Qualitative Analysis of Themes and Patterns

Themes	Number of Mentions	Percentage (%)
Lack of Access to Education	25	34.72
Gender Discrimination in Politics	18	25.00
Patriarchal Norms	15	20.83
Religious Constraints	10	13.89
Political Marginalization	4	5.56

The qualitative analysis identified several key themes and patterns from the responses of the 72 respondents regarding challenges and opportunities for Muslim women's political participation in Assam. Lack of access to education emerged as the most frequently mentioned theme, with 34.72% of respondents highlighting it as a significant barrier. Gender discrimination in politics was also prevalent, mentioned by 25.00% of respondents, indicating the persistence of gender biases within political spheres. Patriarchal norms were cited by 20.83% of respondents, underscoring the influence of traditional gender roles on women's political agency. Religious constraints and political marginalization were less frequently mentioned, with 13.89% and 5.56% of respondents respectively, indicating their relative importance compared to other factors.

Table 5: Quantitative Analysis of Likert Scale Responses

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation
Supportive Legal Framework	4.15	0.76
Civil Society Initiatives	4.06	0.83
Education and Awareness Campaigns	4.12	0.78
Political Parties' Support	4.17	0.72
Leadership Support	4.11	0.81

The quantitative analysis of Likert scale responses further corroborates these findings, revealing high mean scores across variables related to opportunities for enhancing Muslim women's

_____

_____

political participation. Respondents demonstrated strong agreement with the existence of supportive legal frameworks (mean = 4.15), effectiveness of civil society initiatives (mean = 4.06), impact of education and awareness campaigns (mean = 4.12), political parties' support (mean = 4.17), and leadership support (mean = 4.11). These findings suggest a conducive environment and significant potential for promoting gender-inclusive political processes in Assam through collaborative efforts between various stakeholders.

Conclusion and suggestion

In conclusion, the study sheds light on the multifaceted landscape of challenges and opportunities surrounding Muslim women's political participation in Assam. Through an examination of demographic profiles, it becomes evident that while there is a diverse representation of Muslim women across age groups and educational backgrounds, significant barriers persist in terms of employment opportunities and political affiliation. The challenges identified, as illustrated in Table 2, underscore the complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors hindering Muslim women's engagement in political processes. These barriers include limited access to education, gender discrimination, patriarchal norms, religious constraints, and political marginalization. However, amidst these challenges, Table 3 reveals promising opportunities for enhancing Muslim women's political participation in Assam, including supportive legal frameworks, civil society initiatives, education and awareness campaigns, as well as political and leadership support.

Furthermore, the qualitative analysis presented in Table 4 highlights key themes and patterns echoed by respondents, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to address systemic barriers and promote gender-inclusive political spaces. The quantitative analysis, as depicted in Table 5, reinforces these findings, indicating strong agreement among respondents regarding the effectiveness of various opportunities for enhancing Muslim women's political participation. Based on these insights, policymakers, civil society organizations, and political leaders must prioritize initiatives aimed at empowering Muslim women in Assam. This could include implementing targeted educational programs, enhancing economic opportunities, challenging gender norms and stereotypes, strengthening legal protections, and fostering inclusive political environments. By addressing the identified challenges and leveraging existing opportunities, Assam can move towards a more equitable and representative democracy, where Muslim women are empowered to actively contribute to decision-making processes and shape the future of their communities.

_____

_____

Reference

- Amin, R. (Sep 2023). Political Participation of Women in the Char Areas of Barpeta District, Assam.

- Dutta, P., Deka, N., & Kalita, B. (Dec 2023). The Evolving Landscape of Women's Workforce Participation in Assam. Conference Paper.

- Darbaidze, E. (Nov 2023). Increasing Women's Political Participation in Georgia.

- Nwagwu, C. N., Iwuala, C. C., & Ebeh, R. E. (Apr 2024). Analysing Public Perception of Women's Political Participation in Nigeria.

- Kamala, K. (Apr 2024). Shaping the Future: Women's Empowerment through Political Participation in India.

- Del Prado, S. F., & Lu. (Jan 2013). Women's Electoral Participation in Muslim Majority and Non-Muslim Majority Countries.

- Awan, S. Z. (Nov 2023). Women's Political Participation in the Socio-cultural Environment of Pakistan: A Critical Review of Mainstream Political Parties (2018-2022).

- Shafiei, S. S., & Hosseinifar, Z. (May 2023). Women's Political Participation in the Islamic Revolution; Semiotic Analysis of Revolution Posters. Article.

- Easat-Daas, A. (Jan 2020). Muslim Women's Political Participation in France and Belgium.

- Anonymous. (Dec 2023). Dismal Politics: Gender, Risk Aversion and Political Parties in Assam.

- Islam, I. (2024). A Visionary Approach to Political Participation of Muslim Women in Assam's Char Area. Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR), 11(1), d340.

_____