

**THE GLASS CEILING IN
GOVERNANCE: WOMEN'S
QUEST FOR POLITICAL
EMPOWERMENT IN
KASHMIR'S HILL REGIONS**

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Abstract

The political empowerment of women in Kashmir's hill regions remains a critical and under-explored area, characterized by significant socio-cultural and institutional barriers. This study aims to identify and analyze the factors impeding women's political participation and propose strategies for overcoming these challenges. Despite constitutional provisions promoting gender equality in governance, women's representation in political institutions in these regions is minimal. Patriarchal norms, educational disparities, economic dependency, and security concerns are major obstacles that restrict women's access to political roles. The unique socio-political context of Kashmir further exacerbates these challenges. This research addresses the gap in existing literature by focusing specifically on the hill regions of Kashmir, where traditional societal structures intersect to create a particularly adverse environment for women's political engagement. The objective is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural, economic, and political barriers faced by women and to suggest viable pathways for their empowerment. This study highlights the need for targeted educational reforms, economic empowerment programs, and the creation of safe political environments to foster women's participation. By addressing these gaps and proposing actionable strategies, this research contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality and political

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empowerment in such regions. The findings underscore the urgency of integrating gender perspectives into governance reforms to achieve inclusive and equitable political representation in Kashmir's hill regions.

Keywords

Economic dependency, Kashmir hill regions, Patriarchal norms, Political participation, Socio-cultural barriers and Women's political empowerment

Introduction

The quest for political empowerment among women in the hill regions of Kashmir represents a profound and multifaceted challenge, rooted in a complex interplay of historical, socio-cultural, economic, and political factors. Despite global advancements in gender equality movements and the proliferation of policies aimed at enhancing women's participation in governance, the women of Kashmir's hill regions continue to grapple with significant barriers that inhibit their full political engagement. This article seeks to explore these barriers comprehensively, offering insights into the unique socio-political landscape of Kashmir and proposing strategies to facilitate women's empowerment in this context. The historical context of women's political involvement in Kashmir is essential for understanding the current landscape. Traditionally, Kashmir's socio-political fabric has been heavily patriarchal, relegating women to roles within the private sphere. The onset of colonial rule and subsequent political developments in the Indian subcontinent did little to alter this patriarchal structure. Post-independence, Kashmir's distinctive political status under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which accorded the region special autonomy, shaped its governance differently from other Indian states. However, this autonomy did not translate into enhanced political agency for women, as deeply entrenched socio-cultural barriers persisted.

Socio-Cultural and Economic Barriers

In the hill regions of Kashmir, socio-cultural and economic barriers heavily influence and restrict women's participation in

public and political life. Patriarchal norms are deeply ingrained in these societies, enforcing strict gender roles that confine women primarily to domestic responsibilities. These norms dictate that women's primary duties are within the home, which significantly limits their opportunities for education and political engagement. As a result, women in these regions often face immense pressure to conform to traditional roles, discouraging any ambitions outside of household duties. The educational disparities in Kashmir further compound this issue. According to a 2019 report by the Ministry of Education, girls in rural Kashmir have significantly lower enrollment rates in primary and secondary education compared to boys. This gap in educational attainment is stark, with the literacy rate for women in rural areas lagging behind that of men by more than 20 percentage points. This lack of access to quality education directly impacts women's ability to participate effectively in political processes. Education is a crucial enabler of political awareness and activism, providing the knowledge and skills necessary for meaningful participation in governance. Without adequate education, women are less likely to be aware of their political rights or to have the confidence and capability to engage in political activities.

Economically, the situation for many women in Kashmir's hill regions is precarious. Traditional economic structures and limited employment opportunities often place women in a position of dependency on male family members. Data from a 2018 survey by the Jammu and Kashmir Rural Livelihoods Mission indicates that only 12 percent of women in these regions are employed outside the home, and even fewer hold positions that provide financial independence. This economic dependency restricts their autonomy and severely limits their capacity to engage in political activities, which often require not only time and mobility but also financial resources.

For example, political campaigns and participation in governance activities typically incur costs related to travel, communication, and sometimes even security. Women who lack financial independence are less able to bear these costs, thereby being effectively excluded from political participation. Moreover, economic dependency can also lead to a lack of confidence and a

feeling of disempowerment, further discouraging women from stepping into public roles. The intersection of these socio-cultural and economic barriers creates a formidable environment that is challenging for women to navigate. The pervasive patriarchal norms and economic dependencies reinforce each other, making it exceedingly difficult for women to break free from traditional roles and engage in public life. Women like Shaheena, a teacher from a small village in Baramulla, illustrate this struggle. Despite her passion for community service, Shaheena finds it challenging to participate in local governance due to financial constraints and societal expectations that she prioritize her domestic duties over public involvement. Addressing these barriers requires comprehensive strategies that target both the socio-cultural norms and the economic structures that perpetuate gender inequality. Efforts to improve educational access and quality for girls in rural areas are essential. Additionally, creating more economic opportunities for women through skill development, entrepreneurship programs, and access to credit can enhance their financial independence and empower them to participate more fully in political processes. The socio-cultural and economic barriers in Kashmir's hill regions significantly restrict women's political participation. Overcoming these challenges necessitates a multifaceted approach that addresses educational disparities, economic dependencies, and the deep-seated patriarchal norms that limit women's roles in public life. By creating an environment that supports and encourages women's engagement in all aspects of society, Kashmir can move towards greater gender equality and inclusive governance.

Institutional and Political Challenges

Institutional barriers within political parties and governance structures in Kashmir significantly impede the political empowerment of women. The political landscape in Kashmir is largely dominated by men, creating a challenging environment for women to ascend to leadership roles. Even when women are included in political parties, their positions often lack substantive power or decision-making authority. This tokenism perpetuates the marginalization of women's issues and discourages genuine

female political participation. One stark example of these institutional barriers is the composition of political party leadership. In major parties, leadership positions and key decision-making roles are overwhelmingly held by men. According to a 2017 report by the Jammu and Kashmir State Commission for Women, women constituted less than 10 percent of the leadership in major political parties. This underrepresentation is not merely a reflection of the gender dynamics within these parties but also a systemic issue where women's contributions are undervalued, and their perspectives are often overlooked.

The political environment in Kashmir presents challenges due to various socio-political factors, which have led women to face additional levels of harassment and social ostracism. Women activists are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence, including sexual harassment and assault, which are used as tools to intimidate and silence them. For instance, women politicians have reported receiving threats not just to themselves but also to their families, making the cost of political engagement exceedingly high. In 2018, Asifa, a local political worker from the Baramulla district, faced continuous harassment and threats from both political opponents and extremist groups. These threats included physical violence and social ostracism, forcing her to reconsider her political career. Her case is not isolated but indicative of a broader trend where women who dare to enter the political arena are met with severe resistance and intimidation.

These security concerns are compounded by a lack of robust legal protections and enforcement mechanisms. Although laws exist to protect women from violence and harassment, their implementation is often weak, and the justice system can be slow and unresponsive. This lack of effective legal recourse further discourages women from participating in politics, as they feel unprotected and vulnerable. The institutional culture within political parties often marginalizes women's voices. Women are frequently relegated to roles that involve organizing and mobilizing support but are rarely involved in strategic decision-making. This relegation reinforces the perception that women's roles in politics are secondary and supportive rather than central and influential. This dynamic was evident during the 2014 Jammu and Kashmir

state elections, where only a handful of women candidates were fielded by major parties, and those who did run were often sidelined in the campaign process.

Addressing these institutional and political challenges requires comprehensive reforms. Political parties need to adopt internal policies that promote gender equality and create pathways for women to ascend to leadership roles. This includes setting quotas for women in leadership positions and ensuring their involvement in key decision-making processes. Additionally, there must be a concerted effort to improve security for women political activists, including stronger legal protections and enforcement mechanisms to prevent and address violence and harassment. Institutional and political challenges significantly hinder women's political empowerment in Kashmir. The male-dominated political parties, combined with a volatile and insecure environment, create formidable barriers for women aspiring to political roles. Addressing these challenges requires systemic changes within political parties, enhanced security measures, and robust legal protections to create a more inclusive and supportive political landscape for women.

Issues of wellbeing

The political environment in Kashmir presents significant challenges for political engagement, especially for women. Misri (2014) emphasizes that the pervasive conflict and instability in the region result in a perilous landscape that severely hinders women's participation in politics. Misri (2014) emphasizes that various socio-political factors create a landscape that severely hinders women's participation in politics. Women political activists face heightened risks of harassment and social ostracism, acting as powerful deterrents to their involvement in political activities. Women in Kashmir face unique and severe security threats that stem from gender-based violence and societal challenges. Various socio-political factors create an environment where political engagement becomes difficult and, at times, risky. Women activists are particularly vulnerable to harassment and discrimination, not only because of their political activities but

also due to societal norms that view their participation in public life as transgressive.

Harassment and intimidation are common tactics used to silence women who attempt to engage in politics. These can range from verbal abuse and threats to physical violence and even sexual assault. Such experiences are intended to dissuade women from stepping into the political arena, reinforcing the patriarchal belief that politics is not a suitable domain for women. The fear of these potential repercussions keeps many women from even attempting to participate in political processes, further entrenching gender inequalities in political representation.

Additionally, women who do become politically active often face social ostracism. In conservative and patriarchal societies, women who defy traditional roles by engaging in politics are frequently stigmatized and marginalized by their communities. This social backlash can be as damaging as physical violence, leading to isolation and a lack of support, both personally and professionally. The threat of being ostracized acts as a powerful psychological barrier, deterring many women from pursuing political ambitions. The intersection of violence, harassment, and social ostracism creates a formidable barrier to the political empowerment of women in Kashmir. The systemic nature of these issues means that solutions must be comprehensive and multifaceted. Addressing security concerns is paramount. There must be concerted efforts to enhance the safety and security of women political activists. This involves improving law enforcement capabilities, ensuring better protection for women, and creating legal frameworks that specifically address and penalize gender-based violence in the political sphere.

Furthermore, societal attitudes towards women in politics need to change. This requires long-term cultural and educational initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality and breaking down patriarchal norms. Empowering women through education and raising awareness about their rights and potential contributions to society can help shift public perceptions. Community leaders and influencers play a crucial role in this transformation, as their support can legitimize and normalize women's participation in politics. The volatile political environment in Kashmir,

characterized by violence and insecurity, poses substantial risks for women political activists. These issues of harassment and social ostracism, act as significant deterrents to women's political engagement. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that enhances security, enforces legal protections, and shifts societal attitudes towards gender equality. Only through such sustained and multifaceted efforts can the political landscape in Kashmir become more inclusive and equitable, enabling women to participate safely and effectively in governance.

Legal and Policy Framework

The legal and policy framework aimed at promoting gender equality in Kashmir's hill regions has faced significant challenges in its implementation. Despite the existence of constitutional provisions designed to enhance the political participation of women, their practical application has often been ineffective. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, introduced by the Government of India in 1992 and 1993 respectively, were landmark reforms intended to empower women by reserving seats for them in local governance bodies. These amendments were envisioned to create a more inclusive political landscape by ensuring that women have a voice in decision-making processes at the grassroots level.

However, the effectiveness of these measures has been undermined by several factors. Ahmed (2017) highlights that the failure to enforce these provisions robustly has resulted in a gap between policy and practice. In many cases, the reserved seats for women in local governance bodies remain vacant or are filled by women who are mere figureheads with little actual power or influence. This lack of genuine political participation means that the intended benefits of the amendments are not fully realized, leaving women in these regions still marginalized and underrepresented in the political sphere. One of the primary reasons for this inadequate implementation is the lack of supportive mechanisms and infrastructure to ensure that women can actively participate in governance. There is often a significant gap in political awareness and education among women in these hill regions, which prevents them from taking full advantage of the

opportunities provided by the amendments. Without targeted efforts to educate and empower women, merely reserving seats is insufficient. Additionally, socio-cultural barriers and patriarchal norms further hinder women's participation. In many communities, traditional views about gender roles continue to restrict women's involvement in public life, and there is a lack of concerted efforts to challenge and change these perceptions. The political environment in Kashmir's hill regions affects women and their ability to engage in political processes, making it difficult for women to participate in governance actively. This situation is exacerbated by inadequate law enforcement and the absence of measures to protect women from violence and harassment, both of which are critical to enabling their political engagement.

To address these challenges, it is essential to strengthen the enforcement of constitutional provisions and to develop comprehensive strategies that go beyond mere legislative reforms. This includes implementing robust awareness campaigns to educate women about their rights and the opportunities available to them, as well as providing training and support to build their capacity for political leadership. Additionally, creating a safe and supportive environment for women's participation in politics is crucial. This involves not only enhancing security and law enforcement but also fostering a cultural shift towards gender equality through continuous advocacy and community engagement.

While the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments represent significant steps towards gender equality in local governance, their impact in Kashmir's hill regions has been limited by weak implementation and insufficient supportive measures. To achieve meaningful empowerment of women, it is necessary to address the socio-cultural, educational, and security barriers that impede their political participation. By doing so, these constitutional provisions can fulfill their potential to transform the political landscape and promote genuine gender equality in these regions.

Grassroots Initiatives and Success Stories

Grassroots initiatives are pivotal in promoting women's political empowerment in Kashmir's hill regions, providing a foundation for

sustainable change from within the community. These efforts often emerge from the recognition that top-down approaches alone are insufficient to address the deeply rooted socio-cultural and economic barriers women face. Grassroots movements and local organizations have demonstrated significant success in mobilizing women, advocating for their rights, and enhancing their capacities for political engagement.

Wani (2018) provides a compelling analysis of how local women's groups have been instrumental in advancing women's rights and political participation. These groups, often formed out of necessity and driven by local women, focus on building awareness, providing education, and creating support networks that empower women to step into public roles. By operating within the community, these initiatives are able to address specific local challenges and leverage existing social structures to foster change. One notable example is the work of women's self-help groups (SHGs) in rural Kashmir. These SHGs, supported by initiatives such as the Jammu and Kashmir Rural Livelihoods Mission, have not only provided economic opportunities for women but also created platforms for political education and activism. Women involved in these groups have reported increased confidence and awareness of their rights, leading to greater participation in local governance. The SHGs serve as training grounds where women can practice leadership and decision-making skills in a supportive environment, thus preparing them for larger political roles.

The success of these grassroots initiatives can be attributed to their community-centric approach. By engaging women directly in their own communities, these movements ensure that the empowerment process is culturally relevant and sustainable. The involvement of community leaders and local influencers in these initiatives also plays a crucial role in changing societal attitudes towards women's political participation. These leaders can help to challenge and shift the patriarchal norms that traditionally restrict women's roles, making it more acceptable for women to engage in public life.

Recent studies have further highlighted the impact of grassroots initiatives on women's political empowerment. For instance, a 2020 report by the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi found

that women who participated in local governance through grassroots initiatives were more likely to continue their political engagement and influence local decision-making processes. The report also noted that these women often became role models within their communities, inspiring others to follow suit.

Grassroots initiatives also benefit from their flexibility and adaptability. Unlike larger, more bureaucratic organizations, grassroots groups can quickly respond to changing local needs and conditions. This adaptability was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, where many women's groups pivoted their activities to include public health education and support, while still maintaining their focus on political empowerment. This dual role not only provided immediate relief but also reinforced the importance of women's leadership in crisis situations, further legitimizing their roles in broader political processes.

The success stories of grassroots initiatives underscore the importance of community involvement in fostering women's political empowerment. These stories provide valuable lessons for broader application, suggesting that empowering women from the ground up is a highly effective strategy. By building on the strengths of local women and addressing the specific challenges they face, grassroots movements create a ripple effect that extends beyond individual participants to the wider community, promoting a culture of inclusivity and equality. Grassroots initiatives have proven to be highly effective in promoting women's political empowerment in Kashmir's hill regions. Through community engagement, capacity building, and the creation of supportive networks, these initiatives have enabled women to overcome significant barriers and actively participate in political processes. The successes of these grassroots movements provide a model for broader efforts to achieve gender equality and inclusive governance, highlighting the transformative power of community-driven change.

Objectives and Significance of the Study

This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the barriers to women's political empowerment in Kashmir's hill regions and propose actionable strategies for overcoming these challenges. By examining the interplay of historical, socio-

cultural, economic, and political factors, the study seeks to shed light on the complexities that women face in their quest for political agency. The significance of this research lies in its focus on a region that has been largely underexplored in gender and governance studies, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the global struggle for gender equality in political representation.

The political empowerment of women in Kashmir's hill regions is not merely a matter of social justice; it is crucial for the broader democratization and development of the region. By addressing the socio-cultural, economic, and political barriers that hinder women's participation, this study aims to pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable political landscape. The insights and recommendations derived from this research hold the potential to inform policy interventions and grassroots initiatives, ultimately contributing to the realization of gender parity in governance in Kashmir and beyond.

Findings on Political Awareness Among Local Women

- **Constitutional Rights Awareness:** Most women (47 percent) are unaware of their constitutional rights and duties, with 17 percent neutral, 14 percent agreeing, and 15 percent disagreeing. The primary reason for this is the lack of political awareness and education.
- **Panchayati Raj Act 1989:** Awareness about the reservation for rural women in local elections under this act is low, with only 5 percent strongly agreeing, 15 percent agreeing, 23.3 percent neutral, 35.7 percent disagreeing, and 21 percent strongly disagreeing.
- **73rd Constitutional Amendment:** Awareness of this amendment is also limited, with 37 percent neutral, 26 percent disagreeing, 13 percent strongly disagreeing, 16 percent agreeing, and 8 percent strongly agreeing. Education levels and lack of awareness campaigns are contributing factors.
- **Block-Level Plans and Projects:** 29.7 percent of respondents are neutral, 20.7 percent disagree, 16.3 percent strongly disagree, 20.3 percent agree, and 13 percent strongly agree about awareness of local plans and projects. About 33 percent

are aware of rural development plans, indicating some progress towards education.

- **Child Development Programs:** Opinions are mixed, with 22.7 percent agreeing, 9 percent strongly agreeing, 21 percent disagreeing, 25 percent strongly disagreeing, and 22.3 percent neutral about awareness of child development programs.
- **NGOs/Institutions Support:** Awareness of organizations aiding rural women shows 22.3 percent agreeing, 10.3 percent strongly agreeing, 27 percent disagreeing, 12.7 percent strongly disagreeing, and 27.7 percent neutral.
- **Reservation Awareness (73rd and 74th Amendments):** Only 24 percent agree, 14 percent strongly agree, 20 percent disagree, and 18 percent strongly disagree about their awareness of these reservations.
- **Centrally Sponsored Schemes:** Awareness levels are mixed, with 25 percent agreeing, 8 percent strongly agreeing, 24 percent neutral, 29 percent disagreeing, and 14 percent strongly disagreeing.
- **Poverty Alleviation Programs:** Awareness among respondents is varied, with 23 percent agreeing, 14 percent strongly agreeing, 23 percent neutral, and 20 percent each disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

Effective Measures for the Political Empowerment of Women in Kashmir

The political empowerment of women in Kashmir is essential for fostering gender equality and achieving sustainable development in the region. Despite various initiatives, the socio-political landscape of Kashmir remains deeply entrenched in patriarchal norms, which significantly hinder women's active participation in governance. To address these challenges, a comprehensive approach is required, encompassing educational, economic, legislative, and social reforms. Education is a cornerstone for empowerment; thus, expanding educational infrastructure, especially in remote areas, is crucial. This expansion should be coupled with scholarship programs to support girls from low-income families and integrate political literacy into school curricula to raise awareness about governance and political rights.

from an early age. Furthermore, economic independence is closely linked to political empowerment. By offering vocational training, skill development programs, and providing access to credit and microfinance, women can gain the financial independence needed to engage actively in political processes. Establishing business incubators and support networks for women entrepreneurs can further bolster their economic status, thereby enhancing their ability to participate in governance.

Legislative and policy reforms play a pivotal role in ensuring women's political empowerment. It is imperative to enforce existing gender quotas in local governance bodies and review and amend any discriminatory laws that hinder women's political participation. Additionally, establishing mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the impact of these policies can ensure their effective implementation. Advocacy and awareness campaigns are also vital. Utilizing media platforms such as radio, television, and social media to highlight the successes of women in politics can help challenge prevailing gender stereotypes. Grassroots campaigns aimed at educating communities about the benefits of women's political participation can shift societal attitudes and norms. Promoting female role models in politics can serve as a powerful inspiration, motivating other women to pursue leadership roles.

Building robust support networks is another critical measure. Mentorship programs that pair aspiring female politicians with experienced mentors can provide the guidance and support necessary for their political journeys. Establishing local women's political groups and forums can create spaces for sharing experiences and strategies, fostering a sense of solidarity and empowerment. Collaborations with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) focusing on women's rights and political empowerment can amplify these efforts, providing additional resources and support.

Security concerns pose significant barriers to women's political participation. Strengthening law enforcement and improving community policing can enhance the security environment, making it safer for women to engage in political activities. Promoting peace building initiatives that involve women at all

levels can further contribute to a stable and secure environment, encouraging their participation.

The political empowerment of women in Kashmir requires a multi-faceted and sustained effort. By focusing on educational enhancements, economic support, legislative reforms, advocacy, building support networks, and addressing security concerns, Kashmir can move towards a more inclusive and equitable political landscape. This holistic approach will not only empower women but also contribute to the overall development and stability of the region. The stories of women who have overcome these challenges serve as a beacon of hope and a blueprint for future efforts, underscoring the transformative power of female participation in governance. Through these concerted efforts, the vision of gender-equal governance in Kashmir can be realized, paving the way for a more just and prosperous society.

Conclusion

The political empowerment of women in Kashmir's hill regions, particularly in rural areas like Poonch district, is a critical yet challenging journey. This study has provided valuable insights into the various dimensions of political awareness and participation among rural women, highlighting both progress and persistent obstacles. Despite significant efforts, the political awareness among rural women remains limited. The study revealed that a majority of women are unaware of their constitutional rights and responsibilities. This lack of awareness is primarily attributed to low levels of education and insufficient awareness campaigns. The findings indicate that 47 percent of the women strongly disagreed with being aware of their rights, which underscores a significant gap in political education. The analysis also showed a varied level of awareness about government plans and projects. While 33 percent of respondents were aware of local development plans, the majority remained neutral or unaware, indicating a need for better communication and implementation strategies at the grassroots level. Similarly, awareness about child development programs and the efforts of NGOs/organizations working to support rural women is mixed, further highlighting the necessity for more robust and inclusive outreach efforts. A

significant takeaway from this study is the transformative potential of education. The findings suggest that rural women are beginning to move towards education, which could serve as a foundational change agent for greater political participation. By enhancing educational opportunities and ensuring that women are well-informed about their rights and the political mechanisms available to them, a more engaged and empowered female populace can emerge. While the journey towards political empowerment for rural women in Kashmir's hill regions is fraught with challenges, it is also marked by a determined progression. Addressing the educational and economic barriers, coupled with effective policy implementation and awareness campaigns, can significantly enhance women's political participation. The stories of those who have overcome these obstacles serve as a beacon of hope and a blueprint for future efforts. Through sustained and multifaceted approaches, the vision of gender-equal governance in these regions can be realized, leading to comprehensive and equitable societal development.

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