



# InterAcción y Perspectiv

Revista de Trabajo Social

ISSN 2244-808X  
D.L. pp 201002Z43506

**Julio-septiembre 2024**  
**Vol. 14 No. 2**



Universidad del Zulia  
Facultad de Ciencias Jurídicas y Políticas  
Centro de Investigaciones en Trabajo Social

## ARTÍCULO DE INVESTIGACIÓN

### **Empoderar a las mujeres a través de la participación política: un examen de las percepciones de las mujeres rurales indias\***

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10909925>

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#### **Resumen**

El propósito de este estudio fue investigar cómo las mujeres rurales de la subdivisión Dinhata percibían el empoderamiento de las mujeres a través del compromiso político. La investigación se llevó a cabo en el distrito indio de la subdivisión Dinhata de Coochbehar. Es una investigación cuantitativa y cualitativa. Se utilizó un muestreo intencional y entrevistas semiestructuradas con mujeres rurales de la región de estudio para recopilar datos cualitativos. Los datos fueron analizados cuantitativamente después de una codificación deductiva según temas cuantitativos. Según el informe, existen opiniones divergentes entre las mujeres rurales sobre cómo el compromiso político puede empoderar a las mujeres. Si bien la mayoría de las mujeres rurales (47%) cree que las mujeres deberían participar activamente en la política para empoderarse, el 29% ve esto de manera negativa y el 24% no tiene idea de cómo las mujeres podrían empoderarse a través de la política. No obstante, el 67% de las mujeres de las zonas rurales están ansiosas por involucrarse en política. También opinan que los miembros varones de la familia no tendrán objeciones si participan activamente en la política. Además, ven ciertos obstáculos si se involucran activamente en política, como cuidar de la familia y hacer las tareas del hogar, que tradicional y culturalmente están reservadas a las mujeres en la India rural.

**Palabras clave:** Empoderamiento de las mujeres, participación política, mujeres rurales, percepción de las mujeres, desafíos.

#### **Abstract**

#### **Empowering women through political participation: an examination of indian rural women's perceptions**

The purpose of this study was to investigate how rural women in Dinhata Subdivision perceived women's empowerment through political engagement. The research was carried out in the Indian district of Coochbehar's Dinhata Sub-Division. It is a quantitative and qualitative research. Purposive sampling was used, and semi-structured interviews with rural women in the study region were used to gather qualitative data. Data were analyzed quantitatively after deductive coding according to quantitative themes. According to the report, there are divergent opinions among rural women on how political engagement may empower women. While the majority of rural women (47%) believe that women should actively participate in politics to empower themselves, 29% see this negatively and 24% have no notion how women might empower themselves through politics. Nonetheless, 67% of women in rural areas are eager to get involved in politics.

They also opine that male members of the family will have no objection if they participate in politics actively. Additionally, they see certain obstacles if they become actively involved in politics, such as taking care of the family and doing housework, which are traditionally and culturally reserved for women in rural India.

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, Political Participation, Rural Women, Women's Perception, Challenges

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Recibido: 27/01/2024 Aceptado: 12/02/2024

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\* This study is supported via funding from Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University project number (PSAU/2024/R/1445).

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## 1. Introduction

Women empowerment is a global issue as they have fewer opportunities than their male counterparts globally. In Every sphere of life, be it education, career, decision making system and in society as well, women are far behind men. In the underdeveloped and developing countries the gap is wide and the difference is stark. The only instrument that can reduce the gap and the difference is the empowerment of women in all fronts of society. Empowerment may be used to uplift the other half of the population but in the case of women it is inseparable (Paul, et al, 2016). Empowerment is a multifaceted concept. It can happen when proper education is provided to both the sexes. They become aware of their surroundings. Education broadens the mind and aspires them to look beyond the box.

The role of women in society is multifaceted and changed from time to time. From ancient Vedic culture to modern civilization women have experienced motivation as well as deprivation. Women's empowerment should primarily be seen as a process rather than a fixed state that challenges preconceived notions of power and promotes women's success (Jain, 2023). This globalised village takes into account the hardships of the male members. Women today are present in every field be it in minimal numbers but at least in some restricted areas women have pushed the boundaries to acquire her space. The patriarchal society has always pushed women to the private sphere. They lack a voice of their own and she has accepted it without any complaint. She is raising the future leaders and torchbearers but she herself is covered in an invisibility cloak (Arowolo & Aluko, 2010). From the political participation point of view the women lack the proper knowledge. They are not much aware of the political happenings. Governments have laid down 1/3 reservation for women at the local level but in reality, only a few come up to the position (Annakili, 2019). The 1/3 reservation scheme is not to mention a show off of the male chauvinistic society because ultimately the public sphere is mostly dominated by the male counterparts.

In the post-independence era, many movements took place where women took part as active participants. The famous Chipko movement which happened in Uttarakhand Brought in the connectivity of women with nature and the leadership qualities they exhibit (Bandyopadhyay, 1999). Women's participation in political life is considered very important and needed not only for the development of the society but also for women themselves. The world would progress only when women occupy different sectors, and the hardships of the female members are recognised. Political participation is one such field (Mal, et al, 2014).

Lack of proper education stands as a barrier towards women empowerment (Parvin & Sarkar, 2021). With the introduction of self-help group and entrepreneur jobs women have become economically self-sufficient as they engage in small scale jobs. With money in their hand women have become economically empowered and they can voice out their own choices (Mal, et al, 2014). Only becoming economically empowered is not enough political empowerment is also very essential so that women leaders come up to the forefront and they make their choices which are helpful to other women (Parvin & Sarkar, 2021)

## **2. Literature review**

To understand the problem of the study in a broader sense and to gauge what studies have been done on the Political empowerment of women and perception of women towards their political participation, the investigators have gone through some studies that have been conducted in India and in different countries of the world as well. The investigators made a study of the related literature to understand the research gap in the area of the study.

Mal, et al, (2014) conducted research entitled "Empowerment of Rural women through Political participation in Paschim Medinipur District, West Bengal, India" The main focus areas were the role of SHG, engagement of women in workforce and political participation of women. The paper brings out the cultural and social factors that influence a woman's life. The role of SHG have positive impact on rural BPL women in Paschim Medinipur district. Women have started small scale businesses and skill-based training is imparted to them. Women have become economically self-sufficient but still comparatively the work participation rate is still lower than men. Women's political participation is also studied where they have come up to the panchayat, panchayat samiti and the Zila Parishad level but still the number is at a marginal level.

Mohapatra (2017) conducted research on "Economic and Political Empowerment of Women in Tribal Communities of Contemporary Odisha." The first important finding of the research is that tribal women feel equal to men. Tribal women are free to choose their life partner and are active in all agricultural activities, have access to savings and credit, have control over income land and business. In the case of political empowerment

patriarchy exists. The enactment of the Panchayati Raj Act of 1992 has brought a positive impact for women. Thus, tribal women are both economically and politically empowered.

Naik (2017) had a study on "Empowerment of Women through Political Participation in India". The position of women during Pre independence and post-independence is studied together with constitutional provision and status of women in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. The paper points out that women at panchayat level are better represented which is yet to happen in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. Due to the reservation system more women are seen at the local level politics. More women are seen participating in politics at the rural level but at the national level the figure is not satisfactory.

Annakili (2019) studied on "Women Empowerment for Rural Development." The study focused on rural women's empowerment, the issue of proper communication, need for participatory initiative, community, and organizational empowerment together with psychological empowerment are highlighted. Furthermore, a positive impact of self-help groups (SHG) has been identified. In areas of social, economic, and political domain, all these factors give women a voice and confidence to speak out what they wish for.

Parvin & Sarkar (2021) studied on "Empowerment of Women through Political Participation". The study found that in comparison to older times, women now are more seen at local and national level politics. Though the rate is low, at least the positive change is felt. Various factors for women's lesser political participation than their male counterparts, like lack of political knowledge, household barriers, socio-cultural norms and many more are pointed out. Moreover, the paper jots down that when women enter a political domain, the cultural discourse would change automatically, a role model will encourage more women in politics, women's issues will get addressed and gender equality can be achieved.

Kafilat (2004), undertook a study entitled "Women Empowerment and Political Participation in Nigeria", where the position of Nigerian women in politics is studied. The study found that Nigerian women are politically disempowered. Before and during colonial era Nigerian women took active stands but in present day women are oppressed and exploited. There are barriers to women's political participation like cultural barriers, lack of time, existence of political violence and low financial status etc. The steps of women empowerment are also brought out in this paper. Empowerment through education, eradication of discrimination, special quotas for women, equal representation of both men and women and many more are discussed. The paper thus opines that that uplift of women can be achieved by education and Political participation.

Arowolo (2010) studied on "Women and Political Participation in Nigeria". The domestic role of women, their level of political participation, the challenges involved and the dominant role of men in families are assumptions of the study. The paper also gives the numerical data of women present in the National Assembly, State House of Assembly

and other facts and figures. The factors for low women's political participation are pointed out like cultural practices, violence, and high cost of election. Over the years it is seen statistically that the women's political participation in Nigeria has increased. The paper advocates that increasing government roles and workshops in cities and in villages are necessary for increasing political participation of women. It is the man who also needs a mental revolution so that they can allow their wives to participate in politics. Mujahid et al (2015) investigated on "Dimensions of Women Empowerment: A Case study of Pakistan". The study focused on the importance of social, economic, and political factors together with primary education of Pakistani women which help in overall empowerment of women. The study's findings were that the enrolment rate in primary education level has increased which positively affected the labour market over the years. Economically women are less privileged because the unemployment rate is higher. Political rights exist for women, but patriarchy is the dominant leader. Gender equality exists with 50% reservation in parliament. Women representation thus has increased over the years.

Alhasan (2022) studied on "Women Empowerment and Political Participation in Ghana". The study gathered data from secondary sources like bulletin and websites of different Government agencies. The study found that the women of Ghana faced many cultural barriers to take part in active politics. The government of the country and the local authority implemented plans and policies for the women to overcome such barriers. The study further highlights that the policies implemented by the authorities were successful in increasing the participation of women in Ghana and it also increased political awareness among women.

Hasan M.B. et al (2019) had a study on "Women Empowerment through Political Participation of Women in Local Level in Northern Bangladesh: A Case Study of Some Selected Union" The study was a mixed method study where in researchers used both quantitative and qualitative data to understand the position of women in political arena in Northern Bangladesh. The study revealed that women's participation differs demographically. The political participation varies according to their age and education. The study also found that the elderly women are more aware of political affairs than their younger counterparts, though the younger women are keener to participate in active politics. However, the findings indicate that the women who take part in politics can't take political decisions independently and male members are involved in the decision-making process.

### **3. Research question**

After going through the review of literature related to the problem of the study, it has been observed that studies have been done on the political participation of women and related issues, in India and abroad as well. However few studies could be found on the perception of women on their political participation especially in rural areas and some

research questions remain unanswered. Therefore, the researchers identified the following research question to be answered in the present study.

What is the perception of Rural Women towards political participation women for their empowerment?

Whether they wish to participate in active politics or not?

Whether the male members of the family will support their political participation?

What are the challenges they perceive if they join active politics?

#### Objective of the Study

To conduct the research, the researcher developed the following objectives based on the research questions the aim of the study can be listed below.

To study the perception of rural women towards their political participation.

To Study whether they wish to participate in active politics or not.

To study if their family head allow and support their participation.

To study the challenges the rural women, perceive in case they join active politics.

#### **4. Research Methodology, Participants and Data Analysis**

The research aims to study the political participation of rural women, the challenges they face and the overall empowerment that can happen through their participation in politics. Therefore, in the present study, both quantitative and qualitative method were used. The study area was under Dinhata subdivision of Coochbehar district and altogether 21 purposive samples were taken from the villages under Panchayat area in Dinhata Subdivision of Coochbehar District. The purposive criterion sample were drawn from the rural women from the study area who were above 18 years of age and who have passed at least 12th class. The interviews were taken by visiting the homes of the respondents. Due permissions were taken from the head of the family before starting the session. Data were collected from 5th May to 15th May, 2023.

For the study, a semi structured open ended Interview schedule was used. The semi-structured Interview Schedule was used so that the Interviewer can ask the necessary questions as intended, at the same time the interviewee can share her inner feelings and express their Emotions without any restrictions and not be bound by the structure of the Interview schedule. During the interview, family members or guardians were not allowed to be present so that the interviewee can open up herself freely. Face to face interview was conducted and audio recorded which was later put into writing. The timing of the session started from mid-afternoon since that was the time when women would be free from their household chores. After the collection, the data were analysed thematically under four themes: As the themes were already determined according to the objectives of the study, the data were deductively coded under four themes.

## 5. Results and Discussion

### Demographic profile of respondents

The demographic information in terms of age, educational qualifications and occupation is tabulated and shown below

**Table 1**  
**Distribution of Respondent by Age**

Age of the Respondents	No of Respondents
39-45	3
32-38	4
25-31	7
18-24	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>

**Source: compiled by the author**

The above Table 1 shows the age of the respondents. 7 women are from the age group of 18 to 24, other 7 are from 25 to 31 age group. Four women are from the 32 to 38 age group while 3 women are from the 39 to 45 age group. The table shows that the respondents were of varying age from 18 to 45.

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**Table 2**  
**Distribution of Respondents in terms of Educational Qualifications**

Educational Qualification	No of Respondents
Higher secondary (H.S)	7
Graduation	12
Masters	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>

**Source: compiled by the author**

The above Table 2 shows the educational level of the women respondents. Under the category of H.S there are 7 respondents, under graduation there are 12 women and under masters there are 2 women respondents. It is clear from the above table that the educational qualification of the respondents concentrates at graduation.

**Table 3**  
**Distribution of Respondents by Occupation**

Occupation	No of Respondents
Homemaker	14
Job	3
Political Engagement	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>21</b>

**Source: compiled by the author**

In the above Table 3 distribution is done on the basis of occupation. Out of 21 respondents, 14 are homemakers, 3 respondents go out of home to attend their jobs and 3 respondents are engaged in active politics. So, the distribution table shows that most of the respondents are homemakers.

## 6. Thematic Analysis of the data

Under the first theme the perception of rural women towards their political participation was studied. It was found from the data collected through semi structured open ended interviews that 47 % of the rural women perceive that the women should come to the forefront of the politics to empower them. They opine that a political platform is an instrument to empower women and to reduce the societal gap between women and their male counterparts. If women come to politics, they can raise their own voice, and also take part in the policy making decision for the women. Women can take part in active politics and she can do it. In the words of a young mother, "..... a woman can do everything. If she can do a job along with running the family, she should also participate in active politics so that she can make decisions for other women. ...." (Shabana Khatun Sarkar, 22, Kharija Batrigach, interviewed on 5<sup>th</sup> May 2023).

Another woman retorted to the question of the interviewer, "..... women are lagging behind men and to be at par with men, women should enter into active politics. When you step outside you understand how society is, how it is working." (Khushida Banu Bibi, 35, Bhitorkamta, interviewed on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2023)

However, at the same time 29 % (10 respondents) perceive the participation of women in politics negatively and opine that the political affairs are for the men only and women should not take part in active politics. Moreover, 24 % (5 respondents) express that they have no idea whether political participation of women will empower women or not exhibiting lack of political and social awareness in them. Though most of the women have a positive perception that the participation of women in politics will empower them, still the opinion of women on the theme is widely divided. The researchers investigated whether the respondent women want to participate in active politics if provided the opportunity, 67% of the respondents (14 out of 21 in number) wished to participate in active politics if an opportunity is given. The researchers here observed that in the first theme studied above where 47 % of the respondent women opined that the women

should participate in active politics for women empowerment and 24 % of the respondent expressed that they don't have any opinion of their own on political participation and women empowerment. When asked about their self-participation in politics, 67 % responded in positive implying that those respondents lack the knowledge whether political participation would empower women, they are also keen to participate in active politics. A woman at her 30 with two children expressed her wish to the interviewer in her wishful words, "..... I am a house wife. Now my kids are small, so I wish to join active politics in the future when my children grow up....." (Shahida Khatun, 30, Fakirtari, interviewed on 8<sup>th</sup> May)

However, 33 % of the respondents responded negatively when asked if she wants active participation in politics. In the study, it was studied whether the male members of the family would permit the respondents to participate in active politics. The researchers observed that 86 % of the respondents (18 out of 21 in number) responded positively revealing that the village male folks are also interested in engaging their women counterparts in active politics and they are liberal in permitting the women members of the family to engage in political affairs actively. Performing household chores is a common challenge faced by rural women who are politically engaged. This is because, in Indian society, particularly in rural areas, caring for children and household duties are exclusively the responsibility of women. This aspect of the study was examined under the fourth theme. "For a woman to participate in politics, she has to cross many hurdles. We have to manage our family life, look after kids and accomplish domestic chores. Men folks are not engaged in these. A woman has to do all these even if she is in politics...." (Runa Laila, 44, Bhitorkamta, interviewed on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2023).

Moreover, the women also expressed it as a challenge to attend the sudden situational calls as a public representative, which is a common phenomenon in Indian rural politics. The people of the society want their political leader to be at their side every now and then. It is difficult for women to leave the home suddenly, especially at odd hours.

## **7. Conclusion**

The present study was intended to study the perception of rural women of Dinhatia Subdivision on the empowerment of women through political participation. The study found that the perception of rural women on the empowerment of women through political participation is widely divided. Though most of the rural women (47%) perceive that women should participate in active politics for women empowerment, 29% of them perceive it negatively whereas 24% of them have no ideas of women empowerment through political participation. However, 67 % of rural women are keen to participate in active politics. Further, they also perceive some challenges in case they are engaged in active politics, like accomplishing the household chores and looking after kids as these are solely women's jobs by tradition and culture in rural India. The findings are in conformity with Naik (2017), Parvin & Sarkar (2021) and Arowolo (2010). The novelty

of the study is that the paper reveals the perception of rural women in Dinhata subdivision on political engagement and empowerment of women and their challenges ahead. The local government may frame policy for the gender equity in political participation, access of women to the political forefront and smoothen the road for women towards political participation. The study was delimited to the rural women of Dinhata Subdivision only and further studies may be done in broader areas. Moreover, research may also be done to study the perception of women towards their political participation in urban areas.

#### Acknowledgment

This study is supported via funding from Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University project number (PSAU/2024/R/1445).

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