

"Kashmiri Women in Politics: Driving Change in Jammu and Kashmir"

Shujaat Yousuf pirzada

M.A. Gender Studies/ Women Studies

Independent Researcher

Email: Shujaatpirzada1@gmail.com

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolving role of Kashmiri women in the political arena of Jammu and Kashmir, a region historically characterized by conflict and patriarchal norms. Despite socio-political constraints and cultural barriers, women in the region have increasingly begun to assert their presence in electoral politics, grassroots activism, and policymaking. Tracing the journey from early pioneers like Begum Zaffar Ali to contemporary leaders such as Sakina Itoo and Shehla Rashid, the paper highlights the growing visibility and influence of women in shaping the political narrative. It also investigates the current trends, challenges, and prospects for women's political empowerment, arguing that inclusive governance and gender-sensitive reforms are crucial for sustained democratic development in the region.

Keywords: *Kashmiri women, political participation, Jammu and Kashmir, gender empowerment, electoral politics, women leaders, gender equality, political activism, women in governance, conflict and politics.*

Introduction

The political landscape of Jammu and Kashmir has long been shaped by its unique socio-cultural fabric, historical conflicts, and persistent gender disparities, yet amidst this complex backdrop, Kashmiri women have gradually emerged as pivotal agents of political transformation. Historically confined to the private sphere due to entrenched patriarchal norms, women in the region have faced considerable obstacles in accessing political platforms, often contending with societal expectations, limited institutional support, and security concerns. However, over the decades, a significant shift has occurred—from the pioneering voices of early 20th-century reformers like Begum Zaffar Ali, who advocated for education and women's rights, to the contemporary rise of dynamic leaders such as Sakina Itoo, Shamima Firdous, and Shehla Rashid, who have made their mark in legislative assemblies and activist movements alike. This progression reflects a broader trend of increasing female political awareness, participation, and representation, albeit one that is still met with structural and cultural resistance. The 2024 assembly elections, for instance, witnessed a notable rise in the number of women candidates, yet only a handful succeeded in securing seats, underscoring the ongoing gender imbalance within political institutions. In exploring this journey, the present study seeks to highlight the crucial contributions of Kashmiri women to the region's democratic evolution, examine the persistent challenges they face, and assess the prospects for achieving more inclusive and representative governance in Jammu and Kashmir.

Historical Context

The political engagement of Kashmiri women has deep roots in the region's socio-political history, emerging gradually against a backdrop of feudal structures, colonial influence, and evolving nationalist movements. In the early 20th century, when women across the Indian subcontinent were beginning to assert their rights in public life, Kashmiri women, too, began to challenge traditional boundaries. Among the earliest trailblazers was Begum Zaffar Ali, the first female matriculate of Kashmir and a staunch advocate for girls' education and women's upliftment, whose work laid

the foundation for future female participation in both civic and political domains. Her efforts coincided with a growing political consciousness in the region during the Dogra rule and the eventual rise of the National Conference, which itself promoted progressive ideas about women's inclusion in the freedom struggle and public life. Later, figures such as Begum Akbar Jehan Abdullah wife of Sheikh Abdullah and a formidable leader in her own right—further advanced women's roles in state politics through parliamentary service and grassroots activism, emphasizing welfare and social reform. Despite these pioneering efforts, women's political visibility remained limited for decades due to conservative societal expectations, conflict-driven instability, and the lack of institutional frameworks to support female leadership. Nonetheless, these early contributions marked a significant departure from traditional gender roles and laid the groundwork for the growing—if still uneven—political engagement of Kashmiri women in contemporary times.

Contemporary Female Political Leaders

In the contemporary political landscape of Jammu and Kashmir, several women have emerged as influential figures, challenging traditional gender norms and asserting their presence in a space long dominated by male leadership. Among the most prominent is **Sakina Itoo**, a senior leader of the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference (JKNC), who served as the Minister for Social Welfare and became one of the first women to hold key ministerial portfolios in the state. Known for her grassroots connections and advocacy for women's and children's welfare, Itoo remains a symbol of political resilience in the Valley. **Mehbooba Mufti**, another significant figure and the first woman to serve as Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, has played a central role in mainstream politics through her leadership of the People's Democratic Party (PDP). Despite facing criticism for her party's alliances, Mufti's political journey has been marked by efforts to balance governance with public sentiment in a conflict-ridden region. Beyond party politics, **Shehla Rashid**, a former student leader and vocal human rights activist, has brought a new dimension to female political engagement through her activism and bold commentary on civil liberties, minority rights, and democratic governance. These women, among others, have carved a space for female leadership by navigating complex political terrains, often marked by security threats, ideological backlash, and social conservatism. Their presence reflects not just individual determination but a broader shift toward recognizing the importance of women's voices in shaping the socio-political future of Jammu and Kashmir.

Trends in Women's Political Participation

Over the past few decades, women's political participation in Jammu and Kashmir has seen a slow yet notable shift, influenced by socio-political reforms, educational advancements, and the rising visibility of female role models in public life. Traditionally underrepresented, women have begun contesting elections at both panchayat and legislative levels, with the 2011 Panchayati Raj elections marking a significant moment—over 30,000 women contested, many of whom were first-time candidates driven by reserved quotas and increased grassroots awareness (Shafi & Rather, 2013). The introduction of 33% reservation for women in local governance has been a game-changer, especially in rural areas, where women have taken on leadership roles in village development, health initiatives, and dispute resolution. However, despite these positive indicators at the local level, their representation in higher political echelons remains minimal. For instance, in the 2014 state assembly elections, only 11 out of 135 women candidates won seats—a stark reflection of the persistent gender gap in mainstream politics (Election Commission of India, 2014). Cultural conservatism, security concerns, and political instability in the region continue to deter broader female engagement (Qadri, 2020). Moreover, while youth participation is rising, especially through activism and student politics, systemic barriers such as party biases, lack of campaign funding, and the absence of mentorship remain pressing issues. Nevertheless, the digital era has empowered younger women through platforms like social media, allowing them to voice political opinions and mobilize public discourse, even without holding formal office. Thus, while the progress is incremental and uneven, the trend suggests a growing political consciousness among Kashmiri women, laying the groundwork for more equitable representation in the years to come.

Challenges to Women's Political Empowerment

Despite notable advancements, Kashmiri women continue to face multifaceted challenges that hinder their full political empowerment, rooted in a complex interplay of socio-cultural, political, and security-related factors. Deep-seated patriarchal norms continue to define gender roles in the region, often relegating women to the private sphere and discouraging their political engagement (Bhat & Wani, 2021). Societal skepticism regarding women's leadership capabilities contributes to their underrepresentation in decision-making bodies and political party structures, where

they are often denied ticket allocations or placed in non-winnable constituencies. Moreover, the ongoing conflict and militarization in Jammu and Kashmir amplify the risks associated with public life, as female political actors frequently face threats, surveillance, and social stigma, which severely restrict their mobility and public outreach (Qadri, 2020). Another significant barrier is the lack of economic independence and access to campaign resources, limiting women's ability to conduct effective political campaigns and build sustainable constituencies (Khan & Dar, 2019). At the institutional level, political parties in the region have yet to prioritize gender-inclusive reforms, and tokenism often overshadows genuine efforts at empowerment. Additionally, the absence of political mentorship and training programs further isolates aspiring women leaders, particularly from rural or marginalized backgrounds. These systemic challenges, compounded by the psychological trauma of prolonged conflict, create an environment where women's political participation is not just difficult but often discouraged, thereby stalling the momentum toward inclusive governance and democratic equity.

Conclusion

The journey of Kashmiri women in politics reflects a story of perseverance, gradual transformation, and untapped potential. From the foundational efforts of early reformers to the emergence of contemporary female leaders in mainstream politics and activism, women in Jammu and Kashmir have steadily carved out a space for themselves in a traditionally male-dominated arena. While progress is evident in local governance and rising political consciousness, significant structural and cultural barriers still impede broader participation. Patriarchal norms, security threats, lack of institutional support, and socio-economic limitations continue to hinder women's ability to lead and influence political discourse at higher levels. Nevertheless, the increasing involvement of women in grassroots activism, digital advocacy, and electoral contests signifies a shifting narrative—one where women are no longer passive observers but active drivers of democratic change. For this momentum to translate into lasting empowerment, systemic reforms are essential, including gender-sensitive political policies, targeted capacity-building programs, and stronger enforcement of reservation policies. Empowering women politically is not just a matter of representation but a crucial step toward inclusive governance and sustainable peace in the region. As Kashmir continues to redefine its political identity, the role of women will be pivotal in shaping a more equitable and democratic future.

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