



Research Article

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Media, Dialogue and Political participation of Rural Women in Punjab Elections: A Study Based on Jalandhar District

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ABSTRACT

The mass media has a powerful influence on political reality, as it shapes public opinion and lays the foundations of political beliefs. The media often identified as the fourth branch of government in democratic countries, plays a crucial role during elections and in times of change. Sustainable democracy depends on the equitable participation of women in politics and governance. Women's participation in decision-making helps to incorporate and assure gender equal opportunities and gender sensitive policies. Media plays a significant role in highlighting women's political participation, barriers, and the outcomes at the grassroots level. Social media has brought remarkable change in political participation and awareness among rural women. The study intends to investigate news media consumption by rural women of Jalandhar and its impact on their political participation during elections in Punjab. The study used a mixed method approach. The qualitative and quantitative data of political information and participation was gathered through primary and secondary sources focusing villages of Jalandhar district. The findings evaluate that interpersonal communication in mobilising women's participation is low but can bring a massive change if applied effectively at grass root level. Debates and discussions through sustained and deliberate efforts by organisations and institutions promoting training and awareness in politics can strengthen women's role in democracy.

INTRODUCTION

In democracies, the media have a critical role in highlighting abuses in markets, of political power and in the interaction of the two. They play an essential role in public opinion formation and the democratic process. According to Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (1994), media manufactures consent. The author defines and outline the propaganda model which describes the important aspects of the functions of mass media i.e., serving the dominant hegemonic interests of powerful groups such as government and global corporates. However, most media institutions face particular dilemmas because they are, simultaneously, key elements of an effective democracy and commercial entities operating in markets seeking not only substantial and growing audience share, but also revenue from them or advertisers. They benefit from favourable

government decisions about media (and other) policies affecting their non-media assets. These market interests can potentially distort the role that media institutions play in the formation of public opinion and, consequentially, in our democracy. Conversely, the privileged access that media corporations gain from politicians seeking a good press can skew decisions politicians have to make in ways that distort markets while also undermining democracy.

The media in India has a glorious tradition of safeguarding the democratic rights of her people and exposing all kinds of injustices and inequities by playing the role as a watchdog of democracy. When democratic elections are a relatively new phenomenon for many countries in the world, the free media in India has been educating and informing voters in a non-partisan manner and contributing to the opinion formation of the

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electorate. The overall aim of media is fair and objective reporting especially during campaigning, providing information to the electorate about the political parties, their programmes and candidates. Besides, media also provides information about the constituencies and various human development index parameters, offering chances for people to comment on the work done by their elected representatives and providing feedbacks to the candidate. Emerging as a potentially powerful force, electronic media has also been playing a similar role to that of print media in conducting free and fair elections.

The ways elections are conducted in India are changed over the years. Initially, campaigning was done by only a few political parties through public meetings, rallies and door to door visits by political leaders and grass root workers supporting the party. The emergence of a large number of national and regional political parties has prompted a greater need for coordinated campaign communication. Information technology brought revolution in campaigning techniques. Each political party utilizes traditional, electronic, print media and social networking sites to woo the voters.

During elections the interaction of the political parties and political leaders with voters must overcome large social and cultural boundaries utilizing the new and traditional media. Politicians need to communicate with literate and illiterate voters located in vast rural and urban areas. For the Indian political parties, the organisational structure begins not just at the panchayat level but at the ward level, which consists of a few hundred households. Representatives from the grass-root level go on to create the political organisation at the village/ward, district, state and national levels. Elections even to Parliament are won or lost many a time based on local issues. These local issues are best addressed by the loyal workers and leaders at the grass-root level who also take up the responsibility of house-to-house campaigns, wall-paintings or organise eye camps and clean up the local school and help organise the local temple festival to build positive word-of-mouth for the party at the local level. All leading political parties have separate organisations for students, youth, women, trade unions across all major professions and industrial establishments. All these specific organisations too are built ground up. It is this grassroots level, target-specific organisations within the larger organisation structure that enable the political party to do an excellent job of micro-marketing.

For the last couple of decades, the elections in Punjab has become very costly affair. Huge amounts of money are poured into electioneering. A lot of money is spent on high pitch rallies, Vikas Yatras and propaganda, particularly through the print and electronic media. Besides that, the use of electronic media electioneering is on the rise. Politicians launch e-campaigns to woo the electorates through blogs, emails and SMS. The political parties bring

in film stars to mobilize support. To win votes, candidates distribute free liquor, drugs and intoxicants besides the mal practicing of use of money and muscle power, each election witnesses blatant misuse of the official machinery by the ruling party. Despite serious efforts of the election commission, all this goes on in elections.

No one medium can alone be successful in election campaigns. Elections opens channel of communication between the polity and the society, the elites and the masses and the individuals and his government. Thus, these bring society closer to the political system. The political parties leave no stone unturned to influence the voters towards their party. Hence communication is done at mass level and micro level. The interpersonal communication is considered to bridge the gap between the candidate and the voter.

According to CEC Lok Sabha election 2024 Punjab female voter turnout was 62.28% which is approximately 1% less than male counterpart (63.27%). This is less (65.63%) female vote in 2019 Lok Sabha elections as compared to 66.26% male votes. During Assembly elections 2022 71.91% women voters exercised their right to vote which was almost equal to male vote turnout 71.99%. Further in Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur, Gurdaspur and Khadoor Sahib female voter turnout was more as compared to male voters.

OBJECTIVES

- To study/investigate choice of media platforms among women voters to consume information regarding politics, political parties and their strategies.
- To Examine the influence of the dialogue and peer interactions on decision making in elections.

Research Methodology

A research in the field of mass communication involves the systematic study of media content, the forces that shape its creation, how and why people use media and the impact of media content and media institutions on individuals and society. The study has been designed keeping in mind the methodology being followed the world over in researches involving sensitive subjects related to political, economic and social set-up of the society.

The researcher has adopted the mixed method approach. By collecting data using two or more than two research methods including both qualitative and quantitative research. In the recent years it has been felt that any one method of data collection is insufficient. This study concentrates on the elements of the communication-the sender, message, channel and the receiver. In order to study the various elements qualitative and quantitative tools of data collection have been used. Survey method has been applied to conduct survey of women voters of villages in Jalandhar district. A sample of 200 women from five villages was chosen. A questionnaire (schedule) with

30 close ended questions was applied in regional language (Punjabi). The sample included women of all age group above 18 years as in India a citizen attains right to vote at the age of 18. Hence all the respondents were 18 yrs or above in age. The researcher applied non-probability sampling technique to do this survey. Further researcher used purposive sampling method of non-probability sampling technique. In purposive sampling the primary consideration is the judgment of the researcher as to who can provide the best information to achieve the objectives of the study. The researcher only goes to those people who in his/her opinion are likely to have the required information and be willing to share it. The secondary data for study has been derived from the newspapers, magazines both vernacular and national, Chief Election Commission (CEC) portals, State Election Commission portals, Research journals for authenticity of the existing information related to previous elections.

Review of Literature

Media is influencing the whole world and everyone has an ample choice to gain information as everyone has his/her own media habits. Sonam Mahajan (2022), says that Media habits are ways of media consumption by people. These habits are learned media routines emerging after repeated consumption that are cued by internal/external stimuli. Media habit formation involves the complex storage of specific media-related behavioural sequences as mental representations in memory. Advances in communication, largely through the internet, have improved community access to information. Therefore, the media play an important role in society as a source of information, but also as a “watchdog” or scrutiniser.

Meriem Trablesi (2023) highlights in her article that media coverage of women in politics often reinforces traditional gender stereotypes. Reporters frequently emphasize women’s appearances and traditional roles, portraying them as weak, indecisive, and emotional. Women politicians are also disproportionately held accountable for their families’ actions, a standard rarely applied to their male counterparts.

Additionally, women in politics, especially women of color, face significant abuse and gendered disinformation campaigns. These harmful narratives, often amplified by both traditional and social media, aim to discredit, delegitimize, and silence women in political spaces. Such biased and discriminatory media reporting discourages women from entering or remaining active in politics, perpetuating systemic barriers to their participation.

In 2021, a press release by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN Women, emphasized the critical role of women in national progress. She stated, “No nation can thrive without the active involvement of women. We must strive for representation that encompasses all women

and girls, reflecting their diverse backgrounds, abilities, and circumstances across cultural, social, economic, and political contexts. This year’s data underscores the urgent need for bold, decisive action worldwide to ensure women are not only present but fully empowered in decision-making roles. This is achievable, necessary, and must be prioritized immediately.”

Similarly, IPU Secretary General Martin Chungong highlighted the insufficient progress in women’s political representation, noting, “The current increase in women’s participation in political decision-making remains inadequate, particularly when considering that women make up 70% of frontline health, care, and service workers during the pandemic. Achieving greater gender parity in politics is a shared responsibility for both men and women. While we possess the necessary tools to drive this change, what we lack is the political will to make it a reality.”

Selva & Andi (2020) in their research revealed that Men are more likely than women to say that they are ‘extremely’ or ‘very’ interested in political news across all markets. 9 Women are more likely than men to express high levels of interest in news about health and education. Women are more likely than men to report that they use TV news programmes or bulletins. Facebook is still an important source of news for both men and women, but YouTube and Twitter are more popular with men. Women will talk about news face to face with friends and family more than men. They are less likely to comment on news on news websites or on social media. Women’s levels of trust in news, and concern over ‘fake news’ online, are broadly similar to men’s.

Kaur & Singh (2021) Analysed barriers to women’s political participation in Punjab, revealing a significant increase in female voter turnout but low representation in state legislatures. Key obstacles include gender stereotypes, low education, lack of resources, proxy candidates, and gender biases in political parties. Despite improved representation in local bodies post the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992), women’s involvement in decision-making remains limited due to male dominance and lack of awareness. The study stresses the need to train female representatives and shift conservative attitudes to enhance women’s political participation in Punjab.

Philipose (2014) in her research report - women & politics emphasized that psychological barriers to women’s political participation are as significant as physical obstacles. The perception of women, shaped by both political parties and voters, remains deeply influenced by patriarchal norms. Women are often portrayed as “guardians of family values” and “protectors of national ideals,” roles that pressure them to prioritize these expectations over their own rights, including their ability to engage in politics. A study by CSR/UN Women revealed that 50% of respondents believed decisions



about a woman's participation in electoral politics should be made by her family, rather than by the woman herself. This highlights how deeply entrenched societal attitudes continue to restrict women's autonomy in political engagement.

Avneet Kaur (2024) reported in *The Tribune* that the panchayat elections in Bolina village of Jalandhar district highlighted women's empowerment, with all four sarpanch candidates being women. A high turnout of female voters focused on key issues like job creation for young girls and women's safety. The election, described as non-political, emphasized community bonds and the prospect of female leadership, enabling women to voice their concerns more effectively. The elections marked a shift toward greater gender inclusivity and active participation in local governance.

Analysis and Inferences

The study highlights key trends in rural women's political participation and awareness during the elections.

Awareness of political party & political leaders

While all women had exercised their right to vote in Lok Sabha & Assembly elections, 20% abstained from Panchayati elections, pointing to potential barriers like lack of motivation or awareness. A significant 12% of women could not recognize symbols of major political parties, indicating gaps in political literacy.

Door-to-door campaigning proved highly effective, with 96% of respondents confirming candidates personally visited their homes, reflecting the importance of direct engagement in rural settings. Banerjee et al. (2011), observed in studies that personal interactions with candidates significantly impact voter choices hence door to door canvassing remains a dominant election strategy.

Participation in campaigning

Media emerged as a critical factor in shaping political awareness. A majority of women followed election campaigns, only 28% attended local rallies held in their villages, though only 4% participated in events outside their villages.

Freebies in voting choices

Freebies and promises of individual benefits influenced voting behaviour, with 32% supporting parties offering personal upliftment of women, compared to 28% prioritizing village-wide development.

Influence on decision making

Family influence was evident, as 60% of women voted based on the family head's decision, and 20% followed their spouse's preference. Though women's involvement in election has always been linked to more inclusive policy making but the research indicates that rural women often vote based on family influence rather than personal political understanding.

Media Consumption & Influence

Media consumption patterns revealed that 68% relied on a mix of electronic, print, and social media, while 32% preferred mobile phones. YouTube (48%) was the most popular platform for political content, and 48% engaged in debates and discussions, though only 12% actively commented on political programs. The survey confirms that Digital media enhances political engagement by making information accessible in rural areas however 24% readership of newspaper as a source of political information authenticates that rural populations still depends upon traditional media. A very little 16% response to news channels (TV) also indicates less preference and trust in certain channels.

Political Activism of women

Despite 76% of women being aware of candidates, only 36% had direct interactions with them. Additionally, 40% promoted candidates through word-of-mouth, and 24% worked actively with political parties. This indicates that political engagement could extend beyond elections to active participation in governance with further empowerment and leadership development programmes for rural women.

The findings suggest that while rural women are increasingly engaged in elections, structural and cultural barriers, such as limited political literacy and family influence, hinder their independent participation. Enhancing political education and reducing patriarchal influences could further empower women in the electoral process.

CONCLUSION

Women's equal participation and leadership in political and public life are crucial elements of empowerment. The media plays a vital role in shaping how women's involvement in politics, economics, culture, and society is perceived. While media can drive positive change and highlight women's achievements across various fields, it often faces criticism for portraying women in a stereotypical manner.

Today, as societal attitudes evolve and educational opportunities expand, women's lives are improving. Education has empowered women with awareness of their rights and the confidence to stand up for themselves. This growing awareness has also boosted women's political participation and leadership, enabling them to claim their human rights. Women's representation in decision-making is essential for a functioning democracy, ensuring that diverse perspectives are included and that policies reflect the needs of all citizens.

Dialogue and discussion are essential for fostering women's political awareness and participation. They provide a platform for sharing knowledge, challenging traditional norms, and building confidence, ultimately

contributing to a more inclusive and equitable democratic process. The research reveals that women are actively engaged in discussions and debates during elections, highlighting the importance of conversation in shaping their political understanding. These interactions help women stay informed about candidates, policies, and election processes, enabling them to make more informed decisions. Dialogue serves as a bridge to political literacy. Through discussions, women can clarify doubts, share knowledge, and collectively overcome barriers to participation. This collective engagement strengthens women's influence in the political process and amplifies their voices. Even within traditional family structures, over time, these conversations can empower women to make independent and informed voting decisions, gradually reducing reliance on familial influence.

Social Media & electronic media platforms have created new spaces for women to engage in political discussions. Social media, particularly platforms like YouTube, plays a crucial role in facilitating political dialogue. The study reveals that women used YouTube to engage with political content and consume it passively rather than actively engaging in discussions online due to certain barriers may it be cultural, social or lack of political literacy. Social media can accelerate and increase interactive participation through online forums and various online formats for debates and discussions. These personal interactions help women understand candidates' agendas, build trust, and feel more connected to the political process.

The research highlights that women play an active role in election campaigns in which door to door canvassing remains effective strategy which substantiate the impact

of personal outreach in influencing voters' decisions particularly in rural areas where direct interaction are more effective than mass media campaigns.

To Conclude despite the role of media, dialogue for motivating and mobilising women's participation in structured political activities remain low as shown by a very low percentage of women respondent engaged in any political party work. This substantiates the need for greater political empowerment initiative, more leadership training and awareness programmes to transform women voter behaviour into formal roles and governance and policy making. Media can play a pivotal role in fostering more inclusive and representative democratic process by its deliberate and sustained efforts in mobilising women in political participation.

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