



## **WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION AND POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT: FROM LOCAL GOVERNMENT TO NATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN INDIA**

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### **RESEARCH ARTICLE**



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#### **Abstract**

This paper emphasizes the trajectory of women's political representation and empowerment in India, tracing progress from grassroots local governance to the corridors of national power. Despite significant constitutional provisions and policy interventions, women's presence in political institutions remains disproportionately low relative to their demographic strength. This article also analyzes the historical context, current status of women's political representation, the impact of reservation policies like the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, barriers restricting women's political agency and pathways toward achieving gender inequality in Indian politics. It also critically evaluates the interplay between socio-cultural norms, institutional structures, and policy frameworks influencing women's political empowerment. Women's political representation is widely recognized as a fundamental indicator of democratic deepening and inclusive governance. In India, significant constitutional and legislative measures most notably the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments have transformed the landscape of women's participation in local self-government by reserving one-third (and in many states, 50 percent) of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies for women. These reforms have enabled millions of women to enter formal politics, reshaping grassroots governance and challenging entrenched patriarchal norms. However, while local-level participation has expanded substantially, women's representation at the state and national levels remains comparatively limited, revealing a persistent vertical gap in political empowerment. It also evaluates recent policy developments, including debates surrounding women's reservation in Parliament and state legislatures and assesses their potential to bridge representational disparities. Drawing upon secondary data, policy reports and scholarly literature, the study argues that while descriptive representation at the grassroots level has improved significantly, substantive representation and leadership mobility require institutional reforms within political parties, capacity-building initiatives, and broader socio-economic transformation. The paper concludes that sustainable political empowerment in India depends not only on numerical inclusion but also on enhancing women's agency, decision-making authority and access to political power across all tiers of governance.

**Keywords:** *Representation, Reservation, Panchayati Raj, Leadership, Gender, Empowerment*

#### **Introduction**

Women's representation in political institutions is a central measure of democratic inclusiveness and social justice. In India, the world's largest democracy, the question of women's political empowerment has evolved from demands for formal equality to broader struggles for substantive participation and leadership. Although women played an active role in the nationalist movement and constitution-making process, their presence in elected bodies remained disproportionately low for decades after independence. Structural inequalities rooted in patriarchy, caste hierarchies, limited access to resources, and male-dominated party systems have historically constrained women's entry into formal politics. A transformative shift occurred with the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments (1992–93), which institutionalized reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies. These reforms mandated at least one-third representation for women later increased to 50 percent in several states leading to the election of millions of women at the grassroots level. This unprecedented inclusion has been widely regarded as a landmark experiment in gender quotas, generating new spaces for leadership, policy influence and local governance reform. Evidence suggests that women representatives have contributed to greater attention to social welfare, education, health and gender-sensitive development priorities. Despite these gains, women's representation in state legislatures and the national

Parliament remains comparatively limited, highlighting a persistent vertical disparity between local participation and national leadership. Barriers such as party nomination biases, political financing constraints, socio-cultural norms, and gender-based political violence continue to restrict upward mobility.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main aims and objectives of the study is analysed in the following:

- 1) To analyze the historical progression of women's participation in Indian politics, from local governance (panchayats and municipalities) to state and national legislatures.
- 2) To evaluate the effectiveness of government policies and reservation quotas in promoting women's political representation and empowerment at various levels of governance.
- 3) To investigate the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers that hinder women's active participation in politics in India.
- 4) To assess the extent to which increased representation has translated into actual political influence, decision-making power, and leadership roles for women.
- 5) To propose actionable strategies and reforms to enhance women's political empowerment and ensure more inclusive governance at local, state, and national levels.

### **Research Methodology**

The proposed study based on the theoretical background and empirical in nature and some secondary data method like Official records from the Election Commission of India on women's representation in local, state and national bodies. Government reports, academic journals, and policy documents regarding women's reservations, leadership programs and empowerment initiatives.

### **Historical Context of Women's Political Participation in India**

The early women's movement in India was intertwined with the struggle for independence. Leaders such as Sarojini Naidu, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and Rajkumari Amrit Kaur played instrumental roles in shaping India's democratic ethos. Following independence in 1947, the Indian Constitution enshrined equality before the law and affirmative measures for women through Articles 14, 15 and 16. Despite constitutional guarantees, the initial decades post-independence saw limited women's representation in legislative bodies. Constraints included limited access to education, socio-cultural restrictions and patriarchal political structures that marginalized women's voices. Women's political participation in India has deep historical roots shaped by social reform movements, anti-colonial struggles, and constitutional developments. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, social reformers advocated women's education and legal rights, laying the groundwork for public engagement. Women became increasingly active in the nationalist movement, particularly under the leadership of the Indian National Congress, where figures such as Sarojini Naidu emerged as prominent voices demanding both national independence and gender equality. The participation of women in civil disobedience movements, protests, and political mobilization challenged prevailing patriarchal norms and legitimized their presence in public life. After independence, the Constituent Assembly of India ensured universal adult franchise without gender discrimination, granting women equal voting rights from the very beginning an important milestone compared to many Western democracies. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, women's representation in Parliament and state legislatures remained limited in the decades following independence. The rise of leaders such as Indira Gandhi symbolized women's potential to occupy the highest offices, yet such cases were exceptional rather than indicative of broad-based inclusion. A major structural transformation occurred in the early 1990s with constitutional amendments mandating reservations for women in local self-government institutions, significantly expanding their participation at the grassroots level.

### **Local Governance: A Turning Point**

The watershed moment for women's political representation in India came with the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Acts (1992), which introduced mandatory reservations of one-third of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and urban local bodies. This structural reform revolutionized grassroots governance by enabling millions of women to assume leadership positions such as Sarpanch (Prodhan) and ward councilor (Jalal, 2018).

### **Women's Representation at Different Levels of Governance**

Women's representation in India - significantly across different tiers of governance, reflecting both progressive reforms and persistent structural inequalities. At the grassroots level, the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments (1992 -93) institutionalized reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies, mandating at least one-third of seats for women subsequently increased to 50 percent in many states. This reform has led to the election of over a million women representatives, making India one of the largest experiments in gender quotas globally. Women's participation at the village, block and district levels has enhanced attention to social welfare, public health, sanitation, education and gender-responsive governance. However, while descriptive representation has improved at the local level, challenges such as proxy leadership, limited financial autonomy, and patriarchal interference continue to affect substantive empowerment. In contrast, women's representation at the state and national levels remains comparatively low. In the Lok Sabha, women's membership has historically ranged between 5 and 15 percent, reflecting deep-rooted barriers within political party structures, electoral financing, and sociocultural norms.

Similarly, women's presence in state legislative assemblies remains uneven across regions. Although India has witnessed prominent female leaders, including Indira Gandhi, their success has not translated into sustained gender parity in higher political offices. The recent passage of the Women's Reservation legislation for Parliament and state assemblies marks a potentially transformative step, yet its implementation remains contingent on delimitation processes. Overall, women's representation in India demonstrates a paradox: strong institutional inclusion at the local level but limited advancement to state and national leadership, highlighting the need for structural reforms within party systems and political institutions.

### **National Level: Parliament and Executive Leadership**

At the national level, women's representation in Parliament and executive leadership in India reflects both symbolic breakthroughs and enduring structural constraints. In the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha, women's participation has gradually increased over the decades but remains below global averages for gender parity. Although women have consistently exercised universal suffrage since independence, their share in parliamentary seats has historically remained limited due to party nomination biases, campaign financing barriers, and sociocultural norms that restrict women's political mobility. The passage of the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023 popularly known as the Women's Reservation Act marks a significant legislative milestone, providing for 33 percent reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies, though its implementation is tied to future delimitation exercises. In the executive sphere, India has witnessed remarkable yet exceptional instances of women occupying the highest offices. Indira Gandhi served as Prime Minister for over a decade, becoming one of the most influential political leaders in the country's history. Similarly, Pratibha Patil became the first woman President of India, symbolizing progress in executive representation. Women have also held key ministerial portfolios in finance, defense, and external affairs in recent years, signaling incremental change in executive inclusion. Nevertheless, such appointments remain limited in number and do not yet reflect systemic gender parity. Overall, while national-level leadership in India demonstrates important milestones in women's political advancement, sustainable empowerment requires structural reforms within political parties, equitable access to resources, and the effective implementation of constitutional guarantees to ensure broader and more consistent representation.

### **Reasons for Limited Representation**

Women's limited representation in India's political institutions is shaped by a complex interplay of structural, socio-cultural, and institutional barriers. Deeply entrenched patriarchal norms continue to define politics as a male-dominated domain, restricting women's mobility, access to networks, and decision-making authority. Gendered expectations regarding domestic responsibilities and caregiving further constrain women's ability to pursue demanding political careers. Within political parties, candidate selection processes often favor male aspirants, reflecting biases in leadership structures and perceptions about "Winnability." Women frequently lack access to financial resources necessary for electoral campaigns, as political financing networks are typically controlled by male elites. Additionally, gender-based political violence, harassment, and online abuse discourage many women from active participation. Intersectional factors such as caste, class, religion, and rural-urban disparities intensify these challenges, particularly for marginalized women. Although constitutional provisions and quota systems have expanded women's participation at the grassroots level through Panchayati Raj Institutions, this has not translated proportionately into representation in higher legislative bodies like the Lok Sabha. The absence of long-standing legislative quotas at the national and state levels until the recent constitutional amendment also contributed to persistent underrepresentation. Moreover, limited access to political mentorship, media visibility and leadership training restricts women's upward mobility within party hierarchies. Together, these factors create systemic obstacles that hinder both descriptive and substantive representation, highlighting the need for institutional reforms, gender-sensitive political financing and broader societal transformation to achieve equitable participation in India's democratic governance.

### **Barriers to Women's Political Empowerment**

Women's political empowerment in India faces multifaceted barriers from local, state and national levels. Deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and societal expectations continue to view politics as a male-dominated domain, often discouraging women from pursuing leadership roles. Domestic responsibilities, caregiving duties and restrictions on mobility disproportionately burden women, making it difficult to engage in time-intensive political activities. Political party structures further exacerbate the problem, as nomination processes are frequently biased toward male candidates and women often lack access to mentorship, networks, and party leadership positions. Financial constraints also play a crucial role; electoral campaigns require substantial resources and women frequently have limited access to political funding and donor networks. Gender-based political violence, harassment, and online abuse create additional deterrents, particularly for women who seek higher office. Intersectional inequalities, including caste, class, religion, and rural-urban disparities, compound these challenges, leaving marginalized women particularly vulnerable to exclusion. Although constitutional provisions and reservations at the local level have expanded participation, these measures do not always translate into substantive empowerment due to proxy leadership, lack of decision-making authority and patriarchal interference. Media representation and societal perceptions often undermine women's credibility as leaders, reinforcing stereotypes that politics is unsuitable for women. Together, these structural, social, and institutional barriers create a persistent gender gap in Indian politics, highlighting the need for comprehensive reforms, capacity-building initiatives and policy interventions that address not only numerical representation but also the agency, influence and leadership potential of women in governance.

### **Solution for Women Representation**

Women's representation and political empowerment in India have expanded significantly at the grassroots level due to the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendments, which mandated reservations for women in Panchayats and Municipalities, resulting in millions of women entering public office. However, this progress has not been proportionately reflected in State Assemblies and the Lok Sabha, where women remain underrepresented. Ensuring meaningful representation at all levels requires a multi-dimensional strategy that goes beyond numerical quotas. First, the effective implementation of the Women's Reservation framework in Parliament and State Legislatures is crucial to guarantee at least one-third representation, thereby creating a stronger pipeline from local governance to national leadership. Political parties must institutionalize internal gender quotas in ticket distribution, leadership positions, and campaign financing support, as party endorsement remains the primary gateway to electoral politics. Capacity-building initiatives are equally important; structured leadership training, legal literacy, digital skills development, and governance workshops should be provided to elected women representatives through collaboration with bodies such as the Election Commission of India and the Ministry of Women and Child Development to strengthen their administrative and legislative effectiveness. Addressing socio-cultural barriers is another critical dimension, as patriarchal norms, political violence, and online harassment discourage women from contesting elections; strict enforcement of laws ensuring safety, along with gender-sensitization campaigns and positive media representation, can foster a more enabling environment. Economic empowerment also plays a foundational role, since financial independence enhances political agency; targeted public funding mechanisms, transparent campaign finance reforms, and support for women candidates from marginalized communities can reduce structural disadvantages. Furthermore, mentorship networks linking experienced leaders with grassroots representatives can cultivate confidence and policy expertise, while educational reforms that integrate civic leadership training for young women can create a sustainable leadership pipeline. Encouraging women to hold key ministerial portfolios and decision-making roles, rather than limiting them to traditionally "soft" sectors, will ensure substantive rather than symbolic participation. Ultimately, women's political empowerment in India must combine constitutional guarantees, party reforms, institutional support, socio-economic transformation, and cultural change to ensure that women not only enter politics in greater numbers but also exercise real authority in shaping policies from local councils to national governance, thereby strengthening democratic inclusivity and development outcomes across the country.

### **Impact of Women's Political Representation**

Women's political representation in India has had a significant impact on governance, policy priorities and social development. At the local level, the reservation of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies has enabled women to influence decision-making on education, health, sanitation, and welfare programs, often leading to more gender-sensitive and community-focused policies. Studies indicate that women representatives are more likely to prioritize issues affecting children, women, and marginalized groups, thereby enhancing the inclusiveness of local governance. Beyond policy, women's participation challenges traditional gender norms, increases political awareness among communities and inspires future generations to engage in public life. At the national level, although women remain underrepresented, their presence in Parliament and the executive has brought attention to gendered concerns such as violence against women, reproductive health and social equity legislation. Symbolic representation by prominent female leaders also strengthens the perception that women can occupy positions of power, fostering broader societal acceptance of female leadership. Overall, women's political representation has not only improved the responsiveness of governance to social needs but has also catalyzed gradual cultural and institutional shifts toward greater gender equality in Indian politics.

### **Conclusion**

Achieving substantive gender equality in political representation is essential for strengthening India's democracy and enhancing its development trajectory. India has made noteworthy progress especially through local governance reforms that have enabled millions of women to enter public office and exercise leadership at the community level. However, representation at state and national levels remains inadequate. To bridge this gap, coordinated efforts across policy, institutional reforms, socio-cultural change, and economic empowerment are required. Quota systems, while important, must be complemented by initiatives that dismantle structural barriers, transform political party cultures, and foster societal acceptance of women in leadership. Women's political empowerment is not only a matter of numbers but also of meaningful participation and influence in decision-making processes. India realize the full potential of its democratic ideals, it must ensure that women's voices are central not peripheral in shaping public policy and governance at all levels.

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