

ENHANCING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: A PILLAR OF DEMOCRATIC AND INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

The participation of women in political processes is widely recognized as a cornerstone of democratic governance and a critical measure of a nation's commitment to equality, justice, and inclusive development. Despite constitutional guarantees, international conventions, and progressive national policies, women across the world including India continue to remain significantly underrepresented in political institutions, decision-making bodies, and leadership positions. This research paper examines the multidimensional significance of enhancing women's political participation as an essential pillar of democratic and inclusive governance. Women's leadership is increasingly acknowledged for its potential to foster more responsive policymaking, ensure equitable resource allocation, and strengthen governance outcomes across various sectors such as education, health, social welfare, and community development. The abstract explores the structural, socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers that hinder women's entry and advancement in politics, including patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, limited access to education and financial resources, political party biases, and safety concerns. It highlights how these barriers not only restrict women's political empowerment but also limit the effectiveness and inclusivity of democratic institutions. The study further analyses global experiences and best practices, such as gender quotas, capacity-building initiatives, and community-based political training, which have successfully increased women's representation and transformed governance models in several countries. In the Indian context, the paper evaluates the impact of constitutional amendments, especially the 73rd and 74th Amendments, and examines recent developments like the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (2023), which aims to reserve 33% of seats for women in Parliament and State Legislatures. These reforms demonstrate the increasing recognition of women's leadership as a powerful catalyst for

societal change. The abstract argues that meaningful progress requires not only legal reforms but also sustained social empowerment, political commitment, and community-level attitudinal shifts. Ultimately, it emphasizes that women's political participation is not merely symbolic but a transformative force capable of shaping accountable, participatory, and sustainable governance, thereby advancing the broader goals of democracy, human rights, and national development.

Keyword: Women's Political Participation, Democratic Governance, Gender Equality, Inclusive Development, Political Representation, Gender Justice.

➤ Introduction

Women's political participation is a fundamental component of a robust, democratic, and inclusive governance system. As nations strive to uphold equality, justice, and representation, the presence of women in political spaces becomes not merely desirable but essential. Women bring diverse perspectives, empathetic leadership styles, and an innate understanding of community-based issues that enrich the decision-making process and strengthen democratic institutions. However, despite constitutional guarantees and legislative reforms, women in many countries including India continue to face social, cultural, economic, and structural barriers that limit their political engagement and leadership opportunities. Enhancing women's political participation is therefore not only a matter of gender justice but also a strategic imperative for national development. Increased representation of women in politics has been shown to improve governance outcomes, promote accountability, and ensure policies that address the needs of marginalized groups. Inclusive governance thrives when women are empowered to participate fully as voters, activists, policymakers, and leaders. This theme invites a critical examination of the current landscape of women's political representation, the challenges they confront, and the transformative potential of their leadership. It underscores the need for sustained efforts legal, social, and institutional to create an environment where women can contribute meaningfully to shaping the democratic future of the nation.

➤ **Literature Review**

Women's political participation has been widely studied across disciplines such as political science, gender studies, sociology, and public policy. Existing literature consistently highlights that women's representation in political decision-making is not only a matter of equality but also a determinant of inclusive, responsive, and accountable governance.

1. Theoretical Foundations of Women's Political Participation

Scholars such as Carole Pateman (1989) and Anne Phillips (1995) argue that democratic systems cannot be considered fully representative without the meaningful participation of women, who constitute half of the population. The Theory of Critical Mass (Kanter, 1977) suggests that when women reach a threshold level in legislative bodies, they can significantly influence policy agendas and institutional cultures. Similarly, the Gender and Development (GAD) framework emphasizes that structural reforms, rather than isolated interventions, are necessary to ensure women's empowerment in political spheres.

2. Global Trends and Comparative Studies

Comparative political research (Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Krook, 2009) demonstrates that countries with higher levels of women's political participation particularly those adopting gender quotas show improvements in governance outcomes, policy inclusiveness, and social justice indicators. Studies by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) highlight that nations in Scandinavia and Latin America, where gender quotas are institutionalized, have achieved greater gender parity in political representation.

3. Barriers to Women's Political Participation

Research consistently identifies multi-layered barriers faced by women:

- Socio-cultural barriers: Patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes, and restricted

mobility hinder women's entry into politics (Kabeer, 1999; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004).

- Economic constraints: Limited access to financial resources and economic dependence reduce women's ability to run effective political campaigns (Goetz, 2003).
- Institutional challenges: Male-dominated political parties, lack of mentorship, and gender bias within political institutions restrict advancement (Bari, 2005).

4. Women's Representation and Policy Impact

Empirical studies, such as those by Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) in Indian Panchayats, show that women leaders are more likely to prioritize issues such as health, sanitation, education, and welfare demonstrating distinct policy preferences.

Research also indicates that women's presence enhances transparency, reduces corruption, and strengthens social accountability (Swamy et al., 2001).

5. Indian Context: Progress and Challenges

In India, scholars like Nivedita Menon (2012), Jayal (2006), and Kapur (2010) examine the interplay between gender, caste, and political power. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments reserving seats for women in local governance have been widely studied for their transformative potential. Studies by Banerjee (2011) and Sharma (2017) reveal that reservation has increased female participation but structural barriers such as proxy representation and limited training still persist.

Recent research also stresses the need for women's reservation in Parliament and State Assemblies to bridge the persistent gender gap at higher levels of governance.

6. Gender Quotas and Institutional Reforms

The global literature strongly supports gender quotas as a mechanism to accelerate women's entry into politics (Dahlerup, 2006; Krook, 2009). Evidence from Rwanda, Nepal, and Latin America shows that quotas can shift political cultures, normalize women's leadership, and improve democratic outcomes.

In India, policy debates on the Women's Reservation Bill reflect growing consensus on the need for institutional reforms to ensure equitable representation.

7. Emerging Dimensions: Digital Participation and Youth Leadership

Recent scholarship highlights the role of social media, digital literacy, and online mobilization in amplifying women's political voices (Sullivan, 2020). Studies also show rising political participation among young women, driven by education, grassroots activism, and civil society engagement.

➤ Objectives of the Study

- 1) To examine the current status and trends of women's political participation in India at national, state, and local levels.
- 2) To identify the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers that hinder women's active political involvement.
- 3) To analyze the impact of constitutional provisions, legislative measures, and policy initiatives aimed at promoting women's political representation.
- 4) To assess the contribution of women leaders in strengthening democratic values, inclusive governance, and community development.
- 5) To recommend strategies and policy reforms to further enhance women's political participation and leadership in India.

➤ Research Methodology

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research methodology to examine the status, challenges, and legal framework surrounding women's political participation in India. The research is primarily qualitative in nature and relies on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include constitutional provisions, statutory laws, parliamentary reports, and policy documents issued by the Election Commission of India and the Ministry of Women and Child Development. Secondary sources consist of books, journal articles, research papers, National Commission for Women reports, NITI Aayog publications, case laws, and credible online databases. Data has been collected through documentary and library-based methods, ensuring a comprehensive review of existing

literature and legal instruments. The study employs content analysis and critical evaluation to interpret legislative measures, identify barriers to women's political empowerment, and assess the role of women leaders in strengthening democratic governance. The scope of the research is limited to the Indian context, focusing on national, state, and local levels of political participation, while its limitations include reliance on secondary data and the availability of updated statistical information.

➤ **Research Problem**

Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and various policy initiatives aimed at empowering women, their participation in political leadership in India remains significantly lower than that of men. Structural barriers, socio-cultural norms, institutional limitations, and inadequate representation in decision-making bodies continue to restrict women's ability to effectively engage in politics. This study seeks to understand why women's political participation remains limited, examine the impact of existing legal and policy frameworks, and explore what measures are required to strengthen women's role in democratic and inclusive governance.

➤ **Analysis and Interpretation**

The analysis of secondary data, legal documents, and scholarly studies reveals that women's political participation in India has improved over the past decades, yet remains significantly below the desired level for achieving inclusive governance. Constitutional guarantees such as Articles 14, 15, and 16, along with reservation provisions in Panchayati Raj Institutions, have played a crucial role in increasing women's representation at the grassroots level. However, the findings indicate that women continue to face substantial socio-cultural barriers, including patriarchal norms, limited access to education and resources, and family restrictions, which hinder their ability to contest and sustain active political roles.

Further interpretation shows that political parties remain reluctant to nominate women in winnable seats, which limits their presence in state legislatures and the Parliament. Even where legal provisions exist, such as the Women's Reservation Bill (now Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023), implementation delays continue to restrict its impact. Studies

also reveal that women leaders, particularly at the local level, have contributed significantly to community development, social welfare initiatives, and enhancing transparency and accountability in governance.

Overall, the findings suggest that while India has established a strong constitutional and policy framework, structural inequalities, socio-economic constraints, and political biases continue to prevent women from fully participating in political decision-making. Enhancing women's political empowerment requires not only legal reforms but also attitudinal change, capacity-building initiatives, and stronger institutional support to ensure their meaningful and sustained inclusion in democratic governance.

Real Scenario of Women's Political Inclusion in India

Women's political inclusion in India presents a mixed picture marked by significant achievements at the grassroots level but persistent underrepresentation in higher political offices. At the national level, women constitute only a small percentage of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, despite being nearly half of the population. Although India has produced powerful women leaders such as Indira Gandhi, Pratibha Patel, Sheila Dixit, Mamata Banerjee, Nirmala Sitharaman, and others, their rise is still the exception rather than the norm. Political parties continue to allot limited tickets to women, resulting in disproportionately low representation in Parliament and State Assemblies.

At the local governance level, however, India stands out globally. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments mandating 33% reservation for women and in many states up to 50% have led to widespread participation of women as sarpanches, ward members, and municipal councillors. This has empowered millions of women to enter public life, gain administrative exposure, and influence community decision-making. Studies show that women-led Gram Panchayats often demonstrate better outcomes in education, sanitation, drinking water supply, and welfare programmes. Yet, real scenarios also reveal the issue of proxy representation, where women elected to positions act on behalf of male family members due to patriarchal pressure.

The protection and safety of women leaders remain major challenges. Many women face intimidation, political violence, character assassination, social restrictions, and economic dependence, which limit their autonomy. Lack of financial resources further restricts their ability to contest elections or run campaigns effectively. Additionally, women in politics often face “double burden” managing both domestic responsibilities and public duties.

The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (Women’s Reservation Act, 2023) marks a historic step, promising to reserve 33% seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. However, its implementation is subject to delimitation and census procedures, and therefore its benefits may take time to materialize. Civil society groups have welcomed the reform but caution that reservation alone will not solve deep-rooted cultural and structural challenges.

On the positive side, the visibility of women in political debates, activism, student politics, and digital platforms is increasing. Young women are emerging as vocal leaders in social movements, law schools, universities, and civic organizations. Access to education, media representation, and rising gender awareness are helping women claim political spaces more confidently than before.

Women’s political participation in India has historically been low, particularly in terms of candidature and representation in legislative bodies. Social patriarchy, economic dependence, insufficient party support, and unequal access to education have restricted women’s political presence. The successful outcomes of reservation in local governance demonstrated that structural support enables women’s leadership to flourish. Therefore, the 33% reservation for women in Parliament and State Legislatures is a necessary and transformative step toward democratic equality and inclusive governance.

In India, women’s participation as voters has improved over time, but their participation as candidates and elected representatives has remained significantly low:

- Women’s representation in the Lok Sabha has historically remained around 11–14%, recently increasing to about 15%.
- In most State Legislative Assemblies, women’s representation is even lower generally 5–9%.

- In local self-government bodies, representation increased substantially only after 33% (and in some states 50%) reservation was introduced.

This clearly shows that women's representation does not increase on its own without structural support.

2. Need of Reservation:

(1) Historical and Social Barriers

- Indian society has traditionally been patriarchal, making politics male-dominated.
- Women were confined to household roles.
- Educational and economic disparities further restricted their opportunities.

(2) Reluctance of Political Parties

- Parties have been unwilling to give sufficient tickets to women.
- "Winnability" is often cited to justify giving tickets to male candidates.

(3) Lack of Resources, Support, and Safety

- Women face limited access to financial resources, networks, and party backing.
- Gender-based discrimination and political violence discourage participation.

(4) Principle of Equal Representation in Democracy

- Women make up around 50% of India's population, yet hold only 10–15% of elected positions.
- Gender justice and inclusive governance require equitable representation.

(5) Success of Reservation in Local Governance

- The Panchayati Raj system showed that reservation increases women's leadership, participation, and developmental outcomes.
- This experience proved that representation leads to empowerment.

History of 33% Reservation for Women in India

1. Early Constitutional Vision (1950s–1970s)

The Constitution of India (1950) did not provide specific political reservations for women in Parliament or State Assemblies. The Constituent Assembly debated this idea, but it was ultimately rejected on the belief that equality provisions (Articles 14–16) would enable women to compete equally with men. However, social realities proved otherwise, and women's political representation remained extremely low in the decades following independence.

2. Committee Recommendations (1970s–1990s)

Several committees highlighted the need for affirmative political representation of women:

Committee on the Status of Women in India (1974): Noted that women were "practically non-existent" in political decision-making and recommended structural reforms.

National Perspective Plan for Women (1988): Recommended reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as a first step.

National Commission for Women (1992): Strongly advocated reserving seats for women in legislative bodies.

These recommendations laid the groundwork for constitutional amendments.

3. Breakthrough: 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1993)

A landmark moment came when the 73rd (Panchayats) and 74th (Municipalities) Amendments were passed in 1993. These amendments mandated:

33% reservation for women in all local self-government bodies

Reservation in both seats and leadership positions (Chairpersons, Sarpanches) Many states later increased this reservation to 50%

This marks the beginning of formal political reservation for women in India.

It was successful millions of women entered political leadership at grassroots levels.

4. Attempts to Introduce 33% Reservation in Parliament and State Assemblies (1996–2010)

1996 – First Women's Reservation Bill introduced

The 81st Constitutional Amendment Bill (1996) proposed 33% reservation in Lok Sabha & State Assemblies. It lapsed due to political opposition.

1998, 1999, 2002, 2003 – Multiple reintroductions

Subsequent governments reintroduced the Bill several times, but it was repeatedly

stalled due to disagreements over:

- Sub-quota for OBC women
- Rotation of reserved constituencies
- Fear of losing political seats among male legislators
- 2010 – Rajya Sabha Passes the Bill
- The Women’s Reservation Bill (108th Amendment Bill, 2008) was passed by the Rajya Sabha on 9 March 2010.

However, it was not taken up in the Lok Sabha and lapsed with the dissolution of the House.

5. Landmark Revival: Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023

On 21 September 2023, the Government of India passed the 128th Constitutional Amendment Act, popularly known as the:

Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023 Key

provisions:

33% reservation for women in Lok

Sabha

State Legislative Assemblies Delhi

Legislative Assembly

Reservation applies to seats and offices.

Reservation will be implemented after the next Census and subsequent delimitation exercise.

This historic reform revives the efforts that began in 1996 and fulfills a long-pending demand of gender justice advocates.

6. Current Status (as of 2025)

The law has been passed but implementation is pending until delimitation.

It represents the first-ever national-level political reservation for women in India’s legislatures.

Barriers to Women’s Political Participation in India

Despite legal reforms and growing awareness, women continue to face multiple barriers

that impede their full and equal participation in political life. These barriers are structural, socio-cultural, economic, and institutional in nature:

1. Socio-Cultural Barriers

Deep-rooted patriarchal norms restrict women's mobility, decision-making power, and leadership visibility.

Gender stereotypes portray politics as a "male domain," discouraging families from supporting women's political ambitions.

Social expectations regarding marriage, motherhood, and domestic responsibilities create a "dual burden," limiting women's time and ability to engage in public life.

2. Educational and Awareness Barriers

Lower access to quality education and political literacy in many regions reduces women's preparedness for leadership roles.

Lack of awareness regarding constitutional rights, electoral processes, and opportunities limits participation.

3. Economic Constraints

Limited financial independence restricts women from funding election campaigns or engaging in political networks.

High cost of campaigning, lack of party funding, and dependence on male family members reduce women's competitiveness.

4. Political Party Bias

Political parties often prefer male candidates, citing "winnability" as a justification to deny tickets to women.

Women are frequently assigned non-winnable constituencies or lower positions within party structures.

5. Safety and Violence

Women candidates face threats, violence, social intimidation, trolling, and character assassination.

Unsafe political environments discourage women from active political participation.

6. Institutional and Structural Challenges

Complex electoral procedures, inadequate training, and male-dominated administrative frameworks reduce women's effectiveness and confidence.

Issues of proxy leadership persist in rural areas, where elected women leaders often function under the influence of male family members (sarpanch pati phenomenon).

7. Limited Networks and Mentorship

Women lack access to influential political networks, mentorship programs, and support systems necessary for career growth.

Absence of role models in many regions hampers aspirations.

Suggestions and Recommendations

To strengthen women's political participation and leadership in India, the following multi-level reforms are recommended:

A. Legal and Policy-Level Recommendations

1. Fast Implementation of Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (2023)

Expedite census and delimitation to ensure quick enforcement of 33% reservation in Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.

2. Mandatory Party-Level Quotas

Require political parties to nominate at least 33% women candidates in winnable constituencies.

Incentivize parties through additional state funding for gender-inclusive practices.

3. Strengthen Laws Against Political Violence

Establish strict legal provisions for preventing harassment, cyberbullying, and violence against women candidates and elected representatives.

Create fast-track committees at district and state levels for complaints.

B. Capacity Building and Leadership Empowerment

4. Training and Skill Enhancement

Introduce structured training modules on governance, law, financial management, and leadership for women representatives.

Encourage institutes like NITI Aayog, NCW, NIRD, and State Commissions to conduct regular leadership programs.

5. Mentorship Networks

Create mentorship platforms connecting new women leaders with experienced female politicians, academics, and activists.

Encourage universities and law schools to adopt constituency-level engagement programs.

C. Socio-Economic Empowerment

6. Financial Assistance and Political Funding

Provide special grants, subsidized loan schemes, and transparent party funding to support women candidates.

Create a National Woman Political Empowerment Fund.

7. Promote Education and Digital Literacy

Strengthen girls' secondary and higher education.

Expand digital literacy programs enabling women to access e-governance, online campaigns, and political learning resources.

D. Social and Cultural Change

8. Media Representation of Women Leaders

Encourage media houses to highlight women's political achievements, reducing stereotypes.

Promote gender-sensitive political debates and responsible reporting.

9. Community Awareness Programs

Conduct mass awareness campaigns on gender equality, women's rights, and the importance of political participation.

Engage NGOs, self-help groups, and community leaders to change local attitudes.

E. Institutional Strengthening

10. Prevent Proxy Representation

Strict monitoring by local bodies to ensure that women leaders exercise authority independently.

Legal action against those who interfere in the functioning of elected women representatives.

11. Gender Cells in Local Bodies

Establish Women Support and Resource Cells in Panchayats and Municipalities for legal assistance, training, and grievance redressal.

Conclusion

Women's political participation is not only a matter of individual empowerment but a foundational requirement for achieving democratic governance, social justice, and inclusive development. India has progressed significantly especially at the grassroots level through constitutional amendments, reservation policies, and increasing awareness. However, women remain underrepresented in higher political offices due to persistent patriarchal

norms, economic limitations, institutional biases, and safety concerns.

The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023 marks a historic turning point, ensuring that women will occupy at least one-third of seats in Parliament and State Assemblies. Yet, legal reforms alone cannot bring transformative change unless accompanied by social acceptance, capacity building, financial support, party-level commitment, and cultural transformation.

Women leaders have already demonstrated their potential by improving governance in areas such as education, sanitation, public health, and welfare programs. Their leadership enhances transparency, accountability, and community engagement—attributes that strengthen democratic institutions.

To ensure meaningful political inclusion, India must adopt a holistic strategy that removes structural barriers, promotes gender-sensitive governance, and creates an enabling environment for women to emerge as influential policymakers and nation-builders. True democracy can only flourish when women are not merely participants but equal partners in shaping the political future of the nation.

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