

Women in Politics: Structural Barriers and Gendered Realities in Democratic India

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Abstract

Women's involvement in Indian politics is still restricted, despite legislative orders and constitutional clauses. This study looks at the gendered and structural obstacles that prevent meaningful engagement. This includes patriarchal party structures, financial limitations, sociocultural norms, and intersectional disadvantages that affect Dalit, tribal, and rural women. The potential and limitations of the Women's Reservation Bill in advancing substantive representation are examined. From Kerala's women-led Panchayats to the "Sarpanch Pati" phenomenon, case studies highlight both obstacles and effective empowerment tactics. To close the gap between symbolic presence and true political leadership in India. The study also highlights the necessity of institutional support, capacity-building, legal enforcement, and societal change.

Keywords - Women's Political Participation, Gender Barriers, Women's Reservation Bill, Symbolic Representation, Intersectionality

Introduction

Women's political engagement is a gauge and a catalyst for social advancement. But it still faces many obstacles in India's democracy. India, the largest democracy in the world with almost 700 million women, faces a paradox. Although women have been instrumental in mass movements and hold over 45% of positions in local governance because of statutory reservations, as of 2025, their representation in state legislatures and Parliament is only 14% and 17%, respectively. Women's everyday realities in the political arena are shaped by structural barriers. They are rooted in political party cultures, financial

access, patriarchal social norms, and gender-based violence. This under-representation is not a reflection of a lack of ability or ambition either.

These obstacles have already been studied, but new social and legislative developments—like the Women's Reservation Bill's passage but delayed implementation—have produced intriguing new dynamics. Although policy initiatives and grassroots quotas have resulted in numerical gains, women's lived experiences frequently demonstrate ongoing gatekeeping, symbolic participation, and struggles for true leadership.

The goal of this paper is to examine the gendered realities and structural barriers that women in Indian politics face. It examines national patterns, legislative and policy efforts, and the intricate relationships between caste, class, and geography that affect women's political participation. This study intends to contribute to the conversation on democratisation, gender equity, and the transformation of public life in India by mapping the gap between constitutional promise and actual practice by looking at both statistical trends and lived experiences. The study will provide an overview of the historical background, analyse current obstacles, look at legislative solutions, and evaluate the ways in which Indian women can be significantly empowered in politics.

Objectives

1. To examine the barriers that limit women's participation in Indian politics.
2. To explore the challenges and experiences women face in political life.

3. To assess the effectiveness of policies and laws promoting women's political representation.

Hypothesis

1. Structural barriers limit women's participation in Indian politics.
2. Women face challenges and biases that affect their political leadership.
3. Policies like reservations help but are not enough for full representation.

Theoretical Framework

Numerous theoretical stances that explain both structural limitations and gendered realities can be used to frame the study of women in Indian politics. **Patriarchy** theory emphasises how political participation is shaped by male-dominated power structures and deeply embedded social norms. The phenomenon known as "**Sarpanch Pati**" in which male relatives exercise authority in lieu of elected female representatives, is one example of how patriarchal practices frequently appear subtly in India.

By highlighting the structural barriers that exist within political institutions, such as party hierarchies, unequal access to campaign resources, and financial dependence, **structural barriers theory** enhances this viewpoint. Even in cases where laws such as quotas are in place, these obstacles limit women's chances to run for office and occupy leadership roles.

The theory of **intersectionality** also sheds light on the combined disadvantages that women experience because of regional, class, and caste disparities. Women from rural, tribal, and Dalit communities frequently face several levels of exclusion. All this makes participating in politics even more difficult.

Lastly, the difference between significant political influence and mere numerical presence can be examined using the theory of **symbolic versus substantive representation**. Although women have participated more at the local and national levels thanks to quotas and reservations, their actual decision-making authority is usually limited. The study can examine not only the statistics but also the lived

realities and systemic barriers influencing women's political experiences in India thanks to this theoretical framework.

Structural Barriers

1. **Political Party Dynamics:** Indian political parties are still predominantly male-dominated, with men controlling leadership positions, candidate selection, and decision-making. Women are frequently granted symbolic positions or tickets in declining constituencies. Women's ability to advance within political organisations is hampered by the absence of mentorship and internal democracy.
2. **Financial Constraints:** Due to economic dependence and gendered income inequality, many women in India lack the significant financial resources required for election campaigns. Their capacity to effectively campaign, rally supporters, and compete against more affluent male candidates is further weakened by their restricted access to party networks and funds.
3. **Institutional and Legal Gaps:** Despite reservation policies and constitutional guarantees, there is a disconnect between the law and its application. Women's actual representation and political influence at the state and federal levels have been constrained by the Women's Reservation Bill's delayed implementation and the lack of gender-sensitive institutional reforms.
4. **Socio-Cultural Norms:** Perceptions of women's roles in society are still influenced by deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes. Women's participation in politics is discouraged by the perception that it is unsafe or inappropriate for them. Unseen obstacles that keep women from pursuing or maintaining political careers include social stigma, opposition from families, and gendered expectations of domestic duty.

Women's Reservation Bill: Progress, Challenges, and Analytical Insights -

33% of seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies are to be reserved for women, according to the Women's Reservation

Bill. This bill was first proposed in 1996 and has been pending implementation for decades. Although the bill is a historic policy that aims to lessen the gender gap in political representation, the fact that it took so long to pass shows how structurally resistant party politics and the legislative process are.

From an analytical standpoint, the bill demonstrates the possibilities and constraints of legal actions. Quotas can increase numerical representation, but women's substantive participation is still limited in the absence of supplementary measures like financial support, capacity building, and protection from patriarchal interference. Additionally, political parties frequently rig the election process by offering reserved seats in districts with little chance of winning, undermining the desired empowerment. Despite formal reservations, Dalit, tribal, and rural women are under-represented because the bill ignores intersectional disadvantages.

Therefore, the Women's Reservation Bill is an important instrument for advancing gender equality, but its success hinges on how well it is implemented, institutional changes, and enabling social structures that turn symbolic representation into actual political power.

Gendered Realities -

1. Gender-Based Violence and Harassment:

Both offline and online, women in politics frequently experience harassment, threats, and character attacks. Participation and leadership are discouraged by gender-based violence. Many competent women are deterred from entering or remaining in political life by fear of public scrutiny and a lack of safety, which restricts true empowerment.

2. Symbolic Representation: Although there are now more women in government because of reservations, many of them only participate symbolically rather than actually having an impact. Women's autonomy is undermined by patriarchy, which transforms political positions into extensions of male authority rather than independent leadership, as evidenced by the "Sarpanch Pati" phenomenon, in which male relatives make decisions for them.

3. Social and Cultural Expectations: Cultural perceptions still link masculinity and leadership. Family responsibilities are frequently used to evaluate female politicians instead of their accomplishments in the public eye. Since society still expects women to put the home and caring for others before their careers or public involvement, juggling domestic and political obligations is still challenging.

4. Intersectional Disadvantages: Layered disparities among women in politics are caused by geography, caste, class, and religion. In addition to men, upper-caste women also discriminate against Dalit and tribal women. Rural women face additional obstacles that limit their full participation, such as limited education, poor mobility, and weaker political networks.

Data Analysis

Level	Women's Representation (%)	Observations
Parliament (Lok Sabha)	13.8	Declined from 14.7% in 2023
State Assemblies	~10	Under national average
Local Govt (Panchayats)	33–50	Due to constitutional mandates; effective at grassroots
Ministerial Positions	5.6	Dropped from 6.5%

Deeply ingrained structural and gendered barriers are reflected in the glaring differences in women's representation in Indian politics across levels of governance. While state assemblies have roughly 10% representation, which is less than the national average, women only hold 13.8% of seats in the Lok Sabha, down from 14.7% in 2023. Under-representation in decision-making roles is further highlighted by the even smaller number of ministerial positions, which have decreased from 6.5% to 5.6%. On the other hand, because of constitutional reservations, participation in

local governance through Panchayats is higher, ranging from 33% to 50%. According to these trends, institutional barriers and systemic biases continue to limit women's influence at higher political levels, even though legal mandates can increase grassroots involvement.

Case Studies

1. The “Sarpanch Pati” Phenomenon (Rajasthan, Haryana, Bihar) - Because of the 33% reservation following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, many women were elected to lead Panchayats. However, male relatives, particularly husbands, unofficially assumed control of financial and administrative decisions in several northern states. As a result, the term "Sarpanch Pati" (husband of the female Sarpanch) was coined, signifying how, despite official representation, patriarchal structures still threaten women's political autonomy.

2. Chhavi Rajawat - The Educated Sarpanch (Rajasthan) - Stereotypes about rural women leaders were contested by Chhavi Rajawat, the youngest Sarpanch in India with an MBA from Soda village. Under her direction, e-governance, education, and water management all saw innovations. Her story demonstrates how, despite opposition from conventional male power brokers, education and self-assurance can enable women to lead successfully.

3. Phoolan Devi – From Marginalization to Parliament (Uttar Pradesh) Intersectionality in action is exemplified by Phoolan Devi's journey from victim of gender and caste violence to Member of Parliament. Her narrative demonstrates how oppressed women can overcome numerous systemic obstacles to become powerful representatives of under-represented groups.

4. Panchayat Leadership in Kerala - An alternative example of women leaders exercising actual authority is Kerala's decentralised governance model. Social welfare programs and gender budgeting have been successfully implemented by women-led Panchayats in Kerala, demonstrating that women can transition from symbolic to substantive leadership in the presence of

institutional support and gender-sensitive governance.

While highlighting examples such as Kerala and Chhavi Rajawat where education and institutional support allow for true empowerment and leadership, these case studies also show how patriarchal control, social hierarchies, and symbolic participation restrict women's autonomy.

Policy Interventions -

1. Enforcement of Legal Provisions: It is crucial that the Women's Reservation Bill and the current quota systems be implemented effectively. Consistent oversight, openness in the selection of candidates, and disciplinary actions taken by political parties for noncompliance can guarantee that women not only enter politics but also occupy positions of influence and decision-making at all levels of government.

2. Capacity Building and Training: Women leaders require ongoing education in governance, budgeting, and political communication. Their efficacy and confidence can be increased through national and local capacity-building initiatives. Women can also challenge traditional gender hierarchies in political institutions and gain leadership skills through exposure visits and mentoring networks.

3. Awareness and Social Change: Public awareness initiatives that support gender equality in politics have the power to alter public perceptions. Successful female leaders should be emphasised as role models in the media, in schools, and in civil society. Dismantling patriarchal norms that discourage women's participation and normalise male dominance in political decision-making requires a shift in public perception.

4. Institutional and Safety Support: For women to continue participating in politics, safe and welcoming environments are essential. More women can be empowered to engage in politics with confidence by establishing complaint procedures against harassment, guaranteeing gender-sensitive workplaces, and offering security during campaigns. This will

make the system more representative and equitable.

Conclusion

This study shows that a combination of gendered realities and structural barriers continue to limit women's participation in Indian politics. The first hypothesis is supported by the analysis that women's chances to run for office and assume leadership roles are still restricted by institutional gaps, sociocultural norms, financial limitations, and political party dynamics. Given that women continue to face obstacles that limit their autonomy and leadership potential, including intersectional disadvantages, gender-based violence, and symbolic representation, the second hypothesis is also supported. Even though quotas and reservations have improved numerical representation, especially at the local level, they are not enough to achieve complete and meaningful political empowerment.

To bridge the gap between constitutional promises and actual political influence, the findings emphasise the necessity of a multifaceted strategy that includes institutional support, societal awareness, capacity building, and the enforcement of legal provisions. This will enable women to participate fairly and meaningfully in India's democratic governance.

Way Forward -

India must fortify the Women's Reservation Bill and the legal implementation of quotas to attain meaningful participation, guaranteeing women leaders' accountability and decision-making power. Political skills and confidence can be improved through exposure programs, mentorship, and capacity-building initiatives. To question patriarchal norms and advance women's leadership as legitimate, societal awareness campaigns and media interventions are essential. It is crucial to implement institutional measures such as safe campaign environments, harassment redressal procedures, and gender-sensitive workplaces. Targeting marginalised women from Dalit, tribal, and rural communities, policies must also address intersectional inequalities. When taken as a whole, these actions can close the gap

between constitutional promise and significant political influence, converting women's involvement from symbolic to substantive leadership.

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