

From Presence to Power: Women Political Participation, Leadership and A Keen Look at The Indian Context

Vaishali Jain^{*1}, Indira Sinha², Dr. Nutan Singh³, Dr. Darshana Pant⁴, Dr. Ravi Chandra⁵, Sangita Khadwal⁶, Dr. Brijesh Kumar Joshi⁷, Dr. Dheeraj Singh Khati⁸

¹Assistant Professor Department of Political Science Kurukshetra University, Haryana

²Professor Department of Political Science College of Commerce, Arts & Science, Patliputra University, Patna, Bihar

³Associate Professor Department of Political Science Ginni Devi Modi Girls P.G. College, Modinagar

⁴Assistant Professor Department of Sociology Shri Ram Singh Dhoni Rajkiya Mahavidyalaya, Jainti (Almora)

⁵Assistant Professor Department of Political Science Rajkeeya Mahavidyalaya, Thatyur, Tehri Garhwal, Uttarakhand

⁶Assistant Professor Department of Political Science Rajkeeya Mahavidyalaya, Thatyur, Tehri Garhwal, Uttarakhand

⁷Assistant Professor Department of Political Science SSJDWSSS Govt. P.G. College, Ranikhet (Almora), Uttarakhand

⁸Assistant Professor Department of Political Science SSJDWSSS Govt. P.G. College, Ranikhet (Almora), Uttarakhand

***Corresponding Author**

Vaishali Jain

Assistant Professor Department of Political Science Kurukshetra University, Haryana,

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the major dimensions of women's political participation and leadership, with particular emphasis on the institutional, socio-economic, cultural and political factors that shape women's access to political power. It explores the distinction between descriptive representation, reflected in the numerical presence of women in political institutions, and substantive representation, reflected in their ability to influence policies, decision-making and governance outcomes. Particular attention is given to India, where constitutional guarantees of equality, universal suffrage, reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies, and the 106th Constitutional Amendment have significantly expanded institutional opportunities for women's political representation. Despite these advances, women continue to face barriers including patriarchal social norms, unequal access to economic resources, limited political networks, gender-based discrimination, inadequate representation within political parties and hostile political environments. The paper further considers evidence that women's political representation can influence policy priorities, strengthen grassroots participation and contribute to broader changes in gender attitudes and political aspirations. It argues that formal political inclusion alone is insufficient to achieve gender equality in political leadership. Sustainable advancement requires stronger political-party commitment, effective implementation of affirmative measures, greater access to education and economic resources, broader social transformation, leadership development, safer and more inclusive political institutions.

Keywords: Constitutional amendment, panchayat raj, women political participation, gender, discrimination, patriarchy, education, leadership development

INTRODUCTION

Political participation is one of the principal mechanisms through which citizens influence the direction of public life. Elections, political parties, legislatures, local governments, civil-society organisations and social movements constitute institutional and social spaces through which individuals articulate interests and exercise political agency. Within this democratic framework, the participation of women has particular significance because women constitute approximately half of the world's population while historically occupying a disproportionately small share of political offices. The question of women's political participation is consequently not merely a question of increasing the number of female politicians; it concerns the legitimacy, inclusiveness and representativeness of democratic governance itself. The historical exclusion of women from political institutions was closely associated with patriarchal understandings of citizenship. Politics was conventionally identified with the public sphere, while women were associated with domesticity, family responsibilities and the private sphere. Even after women

obtained formal political rights, including voting and the right to contest elections, informal institutional practices continued to restrict their access to political power. Political parties, electoral financing systems, patronage networks and established leadership structures often developed around male-dominated patterns of political organisation. Consequently, formal legal equality has frequently coexisted with substantive political inequality.

Contemporary scholarship distinguishes between descriptive representation and substantive representation. Descriptive representation refers to the numerical presence of women among political representatives, whereas substantive representation concerns the extent to which political institutions recognise and advance issues and interests associated with women. Lena Wängnerud's influential review demonstrates that the relationship between women's numerical representation and substantive political outcomes is complex rather than automatic. Nevertheless, when findings across a large body of research are considered together, women's presence in political institutions is associated with greater attention to women's interests. This distinction is crucial because merely electing women does not guarantee that they possess sufficient authority to influence legislation, budgets, political agendas or party decisions. The global trend nevertheless indicates considerable progress. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, women held 27.2% of parliamentary seats globally in 2025, compared with 11.3% in 1995. Yet the same evidence demonstrates that progress has slowed in recent years; in 2024, despite elections in numerous countries, women's parliamentary representation increased by only 0.3 percentage points. Women also remain substantially underrepresented in the highest positions of political authority. In January 2025, women occupied only 23.7% of parliamentary Speaker positions, while women constituted 22.9% of ministers globally. Thus, although the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed a substantial expansion of women's political rights, the transition from political participation to political leadership remains incomplete.

Women's political leadership is important for at least three interconnected reasons. First, it strengthens the representativeness of democratic institutions. Second, it can alter political priorities by introducing experiences and concerns that may otherwise receive inadequate institutional attention. Third, women in leadership can create symbolic and behavioural effects by challenging assumptions that political authority is inherently masculine. Research on gender quotas has consequently examined not only whether quotas increase the number of women elected but also whether they transform political institutions and expand women's political participation more broadly. The objective of this paper is therefore to examine women's political participation and leadership as a multidimensional democratic phenomenon. It considers the barriers that restrict women's participation, evaluates the evidence concerning women's political leadership, examines the Indian experience in particular, and identifies the institutional and social conditions necessary for meaningful and sustained political equality.

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Women's political participation is influenced by a complex interaction of social, economic, cultural and institutional factors. Although most contemporary democratic systems formally recognise women's political rights, including the right to vote, contest elections and hold public office, formal legal equality does not necessarily ensure equal opportunities to participate in political life. The continuing underrepresentation of women in legislatures and political leadership positions demonstrates the existence of barriers that operate both within political institutions and in the wider social environment (UN Women 2024; Inter-Parliamentary Union 2025). These barriers are often interconnected: socioeconomic inequality can restrict access to political resources; patriarchal social norms can influence perceptions of women's leadership; unequal domestic responsibilities can limit the time available for political activity; and political parties can reproduce established male-dominated networks through their processes of candidate selection and leadership recruitment (Kunovich and Paxton 2005; OECD 2019). One of the most fundamental barriers is the persistence of patriarchal social structures. Historically, political authority has been associated with the public sphere, while women have frequently been assigned primary responsibility for the private sphere of family and household. Although these distinctions have changed considerably, their influence remains visible in contemporary political life. Women who express political ambitions may encounter expectations that their primary responsibilities should remain centred on marriage, children, household management and caregiving. Political activity, by contrast, often requires extensive mobility, attendance at meetings, participation in public events, interaction with political networks and sustained engagement with constituents. The resulting conflict between political responsibilities and socially prescribed domestic roles can discourage women from entering politics or make political careers considerably more difficult to sustain (OECD 2019; OECD 2025).

The unequal distribution of unpaid care work is particularly significant. Political careers can involve irregular working hours, travel, public appearances and prolonged periods away from home. Where women remain disproportionately responsible for childcare, eldercare and household management, their capacity to devote time to political organisation may be constrained (OECD 2019). This problem is not simply a matter of individual choice; it reflects the broader organisation of social and economic life. Women may possess the education and

political ambition necessary for leadership but lack the institutional support required to reconcile political work with family responsibilities. Research on political ambition and recruitment similarly demonstrates that women who are otherwise qualified and politically connected can be less likely than comparable men to receive encouragement to run for office (Fox and Lawless 2010). Consequently, achieving gender equality in political leadership requires attention not only to electoral institutions but also to the social conditions that determine who can realistically devote time and resources to politics. Economic inequality constitutes another major barrier. Political participation frequently involves significant expenditure, whether for election campaigns, transportation, communication, political networking or maintaining a visible presence within a constituency. Access to financial resources can therefore affect both the ability to contest elections and the capacity to remain politically active over an extended period. Women, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, may have less independent control over financial resources and may consequently depend more heavily on family members, political organisations or other sponsors. Established political networks may also favour individuals with access to existing financial and patronage structures. Since many such structures have historically been dominated by men, economic inequality can reinforce gender inequality in political recruitment (UN Women 2024; Kunovich and Paxton 2005).

Political parties are especially important because they function as major gatekeepers to elected office. In most representative democracies, parties determine which individuals receive nominations, which constituencies they contest and what organisational positions they occupy. Consequently, the number of women who eventually appear on a ballot is partly determined by decisions made within political parties before voters make their choices. Women may be active members of political organisations while remaining underrepresented among candidates for competitive constituencies or senior party positions. In some circumstances, women may also be concentrated in organisational or supportive roles rather than being integrated into the strategic decision-making structures of parties. This creates an important distinction between participation in political organisations and possession of political power (Kunovich and Paxton 2005). Research on party gatekeeping has consistently demonstrated that recruitment and candidate-selection processes can substantially shape women's access to elected office. Fox and Lawless (2010), for example, found that highly qualified and politically connected women were less likely than similarly situated men to be recruited to run for office. More recent research likewise identifies party elites as crucial actors in determining the representation of women on candidate lists (Gatto and Radojevic 2025). Candidate selection is therefore a crucial stage in understanding gender inequality in politics. Even where voters are willing to elect women, women may have fewer opportunities to reach the ballot in the first place. Political parties can reproduce established patterns of leadership when they rely heavily on informal networks, political families, personal connections or perceptions of electoral "winnability." Such criteria may appear gender-neutral but can reproduce historical inequalities because men have traditionally had greater access to political networks and resources (Kunovich and Paxton 2005). Research on informal candidate selection similarly shows that the gender composition of party gatekeepers can influence whether women are encouraged or discouraged from becoming candidates (Cheng and Tavits 2011). Women's underrepresentation can therefore be reproduced without any explicit formal rule excluding women. This is particularly important because political recruitment is not a neutral process: perceptions of candidate viability may themselves be shaped by assumptions about gender and electability. Research has shown that voters can sometimes underestimate women's electoral prospects because they believe that other voters are less willing to support women candidates (Bauer, Harbridge-Yong, and Dolan 2022). Gender stereotypes further complicate women's access to leadership. Political leadership has traditionally been associated with qualities such as authority, assertiveness, toughness, competitiveness and decisiveness. These characteristics have often been culturally constructed as masculine. Women politicians can consequently face contradictory expectations. A woman who demonstrates assertiveness may be criticised as aggressive or authoritarian, while a woman who adopts a conciliatory style may be judged as weak or lacking leadership capacity. Such double standards can influence voters, political parties, journalists and political institutions. The problem is not that women necessarily possess different leadership abilities from men but that identical behaviour may be evaluated differently according to the gender of the political actor. Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory explains this process by arguing that prejudice can emerge when perceptions of the female gender role conflict with culturally defined expectations of leadership. More recent research also shows that practical beliefs about women's perceived electability can contribute to their exclusion from political leadership (Bauer, Harbridge-Yong, and Dolan 2022). The media can contribute to this process. Political coverage of women can disproportionately focus on personal appearance, family circumstances, personality, marital status or behaviour rather than political programmes and policy positions. A large meta-analysis of research on political media coverage found that women politicians receive greater attention to appearance and personal life and are more frequently subjected to gendered forms of coverage than their male counterparts (Van der Pas and Aldering 2020). Such forms of representation can reinforce the idea that women in politics are exceptional or unusual rather than ordinary political actors. Social media have simultaneously created new opportunities for women to

communicate directly with citizens, build political networks and mobilise supporters. However, these platforms have also generated additional opportunities for misogynistic abuse, sexualised attacks, threats and character assassination. Recent research shows that online hostility can be particularly gendered in its content and can affect women politicians' professional and personal lives (Jarman 2026). The increasing importance of digital political communication therefore creates both opportunities and new forms of vulnerability for women leaders. Political violence and harassment constitute particularly serious barriers. Women entering public life may face intimidation, threats, verbal abuse, sexual harassment and attacks intended to damage their personal reputation. Such behaviour can have consequences beyond the individual politician because it may discourage other women from considering political careers. Krook (2017) argues that violence against women in politics should be understood not merely as an individual problem but as a broader threat to democratic inclusion. UN Women has similarly identified violence, harassment and intimidation as important deterrents to women's political participation (UN Women 2021). Evidence from South Asia has demonstrated that violence and fear of violence can substantially discourage women from participating in political life, particularly in contexts where institutional protections are weak (UN Women 2014). Violence against women in politics can consequently function as a mechanism of political exclusion even where no formal restriction on women's participation exists. Education and political knowledge also influence political participation, although their relationship with gender is complex. Educational expansion has significantly increased women's capacity to engage with political institutions, understand public policy and participate in political organisations. Nevertheless, educational attainment by itself does not eliminate structural barriers. A highly educated woman may still encounter discrimination within political parties, unequal access to campaign finance, family restrictions or social stereotypes concerning appropriate female behaviour. UN Women identifies education, contacts, resources and institutional conditions as interconnected factors affecting women's capacity to become effective political leaders (UN Women 2024). Education should therefore be understood as an important resource for political participation rather than as a complete solution to gender inequality.

Social class, caste, ethnicity, religion, race and geographical location can further shape women's political opportunities. Women cannot be treated as a single homogeneous political category. The political experiences of an economically privileged woman with an established political family may differ substantially from those of a woman from a poor rural household or a socially marginalised community. Intersectionality is therefore important for understanding political representation. Scholarship on intersectionality and political participation demonstrates that gender interacts with race, ethnicity and class to shape access to political institutions and political power (Strolovitch, Wong, and Proctor 2022). Increasing the overall number of women in political institutions does not necessarily ensure that women from disadvantaged or historically excluded communities receive equal opportunities to become representatives or leaders. Recent research similarly demonstrates that citizens from racial and ethnic minority communities may assess political representation through multiple intersecting identities and experiences rather than gender alone (de Jong and Mügge 2024). Family and kinship networks can have an ambivalent influence. On the one hand, political families can provide women with access to political knowledge, financial resources, established networks and recognition among voters. On the other hand, dependence on political families may limit the autonomy of women representatives and reinforce the idea that women enter politics primarily through male relatives. This is particularly relevant in societies where political institutions have traditionally been organised through kinship and patronage. Research on candidate selection shows that family characteristics can influence how political gatekeepers evaluate women candidates, particularly where political status is strongly connected to family networks (Bjarnegård 2013). Women's independent political trajectories therefore remain an important measure of the depth of political empowerment.

The question of women's political participation must also distinguish between formal participation and effective participation. Formal participation exists when women possess the legal right to vote, contest elections and hold office. Effective participation requires considerably more: women must have genuine access to candidacy, campaign resources, political networks, information, institutional authority and opportunities to influence decisions. A political system can therefore satisfy formal standards of equality while continuing to produce substantial inequalities in political outcomes (UN Women 2024). The continuing gap in political representation illustrates this distinction. The Inter-Parliamentary Union reported that women held 27.2 percent of seats in national parliaments in 2025, while the proportion rose only marginally to 27.5 percent at the beginning of 2026, demonstrating the continuing gap between formal political rights and substantive political equality (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2025; Inter-Parliamentary Union 2026). Institutional mechanisms such as electoral quotas and reserved seats have emerged partly in response to these structural inequalities. Their underlying rationale is that political competition cannot be considered completely equal when participants enter the competition with historically unequal access to resources and opportunities. Gender quotas can interrupt established patterns of political recruitment by requiring parties or electoral systems to include a specified proportion of women

(Dahlerup 2006). Comparative research demonstrates that quotas can increase women's representation and, under appropriate institutional conditions, contribute to women's advancement into political leadership (O'Brien and Rickne 2016). Research from India also indicates that gender quotas can broaden the pool of women entering electoral politics and can encourage participation among individuals without established political leadership experience (Chaudhuri et al. 2025). However, quotas alone cannot guarantee effective leadership. Their success depends on their design, enforcement, the willingness of political parties to implement them meaningfully and the extent to which women representatives receive access to institutional resources and decision-making authority.

REPRESENTATION AND DEMOCRATIC TRANSFORMATION

Women's political leadership represents a significant dimension of democratic transformation because political institutions do not merely administer existing social arrangements; they also determine whose experiences, priorities and interests receive recognition in public decision-making. For this reason, the question of women's representation cannot be reduced to the numerical presence of women in legislatures, cabinets, political parties or local governments. It also involves the extent to which women representatives possess the authority and institutional capacity to influence legislation, public policy, budgets and political agendas (Wängnerud 2009). The distinction between descriptive representation and substantive representation is therefore particularly important. Descriptive representation refers to the presence of women within political institutions, whereas substantive representation concerns the representation of women's interests through political action and policymaking. A legislature may contain women without necessarily producing policies that advance gender equality, just as a male politician may advocate policies that benefit women. Nevertheless, extensive research indicates that the presence of women in political institutions can create conditions in which issues affecting women receive greater political attention (Wängnerud 2009). The theoretical significance of women's presence in political institutions can be understood through Anne Phillips's concept of the "politics of presence." Phillips challenges the assumption that political representation can be understood entirely through the representation of ideas or interests. According to this perspective, democratic institutions should also reflect the social composition of the populations they govern. Groups that have historically been excluded from decision-making may possess experiences that are inadequately represented when political institutions are dominated by members of other social groups (Phillips 1995). The argument does not imply that all women share identical political interests or that women automatically represent women. Rather, it suggests that the systematic absence of women from positions of authority can itself constitute a democratic deficit. Their presence expands the range of experiences and perspectives available within political deliberation. The concept of descriptive representation is consequently important, but it should not be understood as sufficient by itself. The presence of women in parliament can have symbolic significance because it challenges historically established assumptions about who is entitled to exercise political authority. When women occupy positions traditionally associated with men, political leadership becomes less exclusively identified with masculinity. This can influence social perceptions of women's political competence and encourage younger women and girls to view political participation as a realistic possibility. Research on women's descriptive representation has found that the presence of women in political institutions can be associated with greater political efficacy and engagement among citizens (Wängnerud 2009). Political representation can therefore have a demonstrative effect: women who see other women occupying positions of political authority may develop greater confidence in their own political capabilities and may become more willing to participate in political organisations, campaigns and elections. The relationship between women's representation and substantive policy change, however, is complex. Women politicians do not constitute a politically uniform group. Their political positions are influenced by political parties, ideology, class, caste, ethnicity, religion, region, professional background and personal political interests. Consequently, it would be misleading to assume that every woman representative will necessarily prioritise women's rights or adopt identical policy positions. Nevertheless, comparative scholarship has identified meaningful associations between women's legislative representation and attention to issues affecting women. Wängnerud's review of the literature concludes that, although the empirical relationship varies across contexts, a broad body of research provides evidence that women legislators contribute to strengthening the position of women's interests in parliamentary politics (Wängnerud 2009).

One important area in which women's political leadership can have substantive consequences is public policy. Women representatives may bring greater attention to issues such as maternal health, reproductive health, childcare, education, violence against women, sanitation, access to drinking water, social welfare and economic opportunities. These issues are not exclusively "women's issues," since they affect entire communities, but women's experiences may make certain problems more visible within political decision-making. The importance of this phenomenon becomes particularly evident at the local level, where political representatives frequently deal directly with questions concerning water supply, sanitation, roads, health facilities, schools, nutrition and welfare programmes. Women's participation can therefore broaden the definition of what constitutes a political priority. Research on women's leadership in local government has provided particularly important evidence in this regard.

Studies of India by Raghavendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo examined villages where political leadership positions were randomly reserved for women. Their study of 265 village councils in West Bengal and Rajasthan found that reservation affected the types of public goods provided, with women leaders placing greater emphasis on infrastructure relevant to the concerns of women (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004). The significance of these findings lies not in the assumption that women always govern differently from men, but in demonstrating that the identity and experiences of political decision-makers can affect the allocation of public resources.

Women's political leadership can also influence the behaviour and political participation of other women. Political institutions are not isolated from society; representatives interact with citizens, recruit supporters, communicate political information and create organisational networks. Recent research by Tanushree Goyal provides particularly strong evidence from India that women politicians can increase women's political participation through grassroots party organisation. Using citizen surveys, surveys of party activists and politicians, and a natural experiment involving gender quotas in Delhi, Goyal found that women politicians were more likely to recruit women party activists and that citizens in reserved constituencies experienced greater contact with women activists. Such contact was positively associated with political knowledge and political participation (Goyal 2024). This suggests that women's representation can produce a broader political multiplier effect: representation at the institutional level can contribute to participation at the societal level. The relationship between political leadership and political participation is particularly important because democracy depends not only on periodic voting but also on continuing civic engagement. Women who become involved in political campaigns, local organisations, political parties or community institutions develop political knowledge and networks that can facilitate further participation. Political participation can thus become cumulative. A woman who initially becomes involved in politics through a local elected position may subsequently acquire administrative experience, develop political networks and contest higher office. Recent research from Delhi further indicates that greater representation of women in local politics can expand women's grassroots networks and improve the prospects of female politicians for advancement within party structures (Goyal 2025).

Gender quotas have played an important role in facilitating this process. In many political systems, women face disadvantages during candidate selection because political parties rely on established networks that have historically been dominated by men. Quotas can interrupt these patterns by requiring a particular proportion of candidates or elected representatives to be women. Comparative research has demonstrated that quotas can significantly increase women's representation, although their effectiveness varies according to electoral systems, enforcement mechanisms and political-party behaviour (Dahlerup 2006). A quota is therefore best understood as an institutional mechanism for overcoming historical exclusion rather than as a guarantee of substantive equality. Research by Diana Z. O'Brien and Johanna Rickne provides evidence that quotas can also affect access to leadership. Examining a 50–50 gender quota in Swedish Social Democratic municipal branches, they found that stronger quota effects increased the likelihood that women would be selected for top political posts and increased the pool of women perceived as qualified for leadership positions (O'Brien and Rickne 2016). The effects of quotas can extend beyond the immediate increase in the number of women elected. When women enter political institutions in substantial numbers, their presence can gradually normalise women's political leadership. This may weaken stereotypes concerning political competence and alter expectations among voters, party members and political elites. Research by O'Brien and Rickne demonstrates that quotas can contribute to women's advancement into political leadership positions, suggesting that institutional interventions can influence not only descriptive representation but also the composition of leadership pools (O'Brien and Rickne 2016). However, the relationship between women's representation and political effectiveness should be treated with analytical caution. Women politicians should not be portrayed as inherently more ethical, compassionate, democratic or development-oriented than men. Such assumptions can reproduce another form of gender stereotyping. Political leadership is shaped by institutional incentives, political ideology, administrative structures and individual characteristics rather than by gender alone. The strongest argument for women's representation is therefore not that women possess a naturally superior form of politics but that a democratic institution is incomplete when half of its population faces systematic barriers to political authority (Phillips 1995; Wängnerud 2009). This distinction is particularly important when evaluating the performance of women representatives who enter politics through reservation systems. Newly elected representatives may initially have limited political or administrative experience, especially when political institutions have historically excluded women. Research on Indian local government has identified circumstances in which women leaders experienced institutional and administrative constraints. Such findings should not be interpreted as evidence that women are inherently less capable of political leadership. Rather, they demonstrate the importance of institutional learning. If individuals are excluded from political office for generations and are then suddenly given opportunities through affirmative representation, it is reasonable to expect that some will require training, experience and institutional support.

The phenomenon sometimes described as proxy representation illustrates another challenge. In some local political contexts, a woman elected to a reserved position may initially depend upon a husband, father, brother or another male relative for political advice or interaction with officials. Evidence from India continues to identify proxy representation as a concern in Panchayati Raj Institutions, which has led the Ministry of Panchayati Raj to emphasise capacity-building and independent decision-making among elected women representatives (Ministry of Panchayati Raj 2026). This problem, however, should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that reservations have failed to empower women. A more nuanced interpretation recognises political empowerment as a process rather than an instantaneous outcome. Women who initially enter politics with limited autonomy may acquire knowledge of government procedures, develop relationships with officials and citizens, become familiar with budgets and public programmes, and gradually develop independent political identities. Recent research supports this longer-term perspective: Goyal finds that women's increased presence in local politics can strengthen grassroots networks and contribute to the subsequent advancement of women politicians within party hierarchies (Goyal 2025). Women's political leadership also has a symbolic dimension that extends beyond policy outcomes. Political authority has historically been represented through masculine imagery: the political leader, parliamentarian, minister or head of government has frequently been imagined as male. The increasing presence of women challenges this political symbolism. It communicates that political authority is not inherently masculine and that women are legitimate participants in defining collective priorities (Phillips 1995). This symbolic dimension is particularly important for younger generations because political institutions can influence aspirations. The visibility of women in positions of authority can alter perceptions of what forms of career and public service are socially acceptable for women. At the same time, women leaders frequently face a distinctive burden of scrutiny. Their personal lives, appearance, family relationships, speech, clothing and behaviour may receive greater attention than those of male political leaders. Political opponents and media organisations may use gendered narratives to question their competence or legitimacy. Such gendered evaluations are consistent with the broader literature demonstrating that women in political institutions can encounter forms of scrutiny that differ from those experienced by men (Wängnerud 2009). Social media have intensified this problem by allowing political criticism, harassment and gendered abuse to spread rapidly. Consequently, increasing the number of women in politics without addressing political harassment and gender-based abuse may leave women formally represented but practically disadvantaged. The issue of leadership therefore requires attention to power, rather than merely presence. A woman may hold a parliamentary seat but have little influence within her party. A woman may serve as a local representative but lack control over administrative resources. A political party may have a substantial number of women members but very few women in its highest decision-making bodies. These distinctions reveal why political empowerment should be assessed through multiple dimensions: numerical representation, access to leadership positions, influence over policy, control over resources, participation in candidate selection and institutional autonomy (Wängnerud 2009; O'Brien and Rickne 2016). Women's political leadership can also contribute to broader democratic accountability. A politically diverse institution may be more capable of identifying social problems that are overlooked by a homogeneous political elite. This does not mean that women alone can represent all marginalised groups, but greater diversity can make political deliberation more responsive to different social experiences. Women's leadership can consequently strengthen the deliberative dimension of democracy by expanding the range of perspectives through which public problems are understood (Phillips 1995).

The ultimate objective, therefore, should be to move from representation to meaningful political power. Numerical representation is an essential foundation because women cannot exercise institutional influence if they are absent from institutions altogether. Yet representation becomes transformative only when women possess the authority, resources, knowledge and autonomy necessary to participate effectively in decision-making. Political parties must provide genuine opportunities for women to occupy winnable constituencies and senior leadership positions. Electoral institutions must ensure that women are not disadvantaged by discriminatory practices. Governments and civil-society organisations can contribute through leadership training, political education, mentoring and institutional support. Evidence from India suggests that women's representation can generate wider political effects by strengthening grassroots activism, increasing political contact and expanding pathways to higher political office (Goyal 2024; Goyal 2025). Measures addressing political violence and harassment are equally necessary to ensure that women can participate without disproportionate personal risk. Democratic transformation is therefore achieved not simply when women enter political institutions, but when their presence develops into sustained political influence, independent leadership and substantive participation in the exercise of public power.

THE INDIAN CONTEXT

India presents a particularly significant case for examining women's political participation because the country adopted universal adult franchise at the commencement of the Republic, giving women the formal right to vote and participate in elections from the beginning of independent democratic governance. This was an important

departure from political systems in which women's suffrage was introduced only after prolonged political struggles. The constitutional framework of India further established equality before law and prohibited discrimination on grounds including sex. Nevertheless, the existence of equal constitutional rights did not immediately translate into proportionate representation of women in legislative institutions. For several decades after independence, women remained a relatively small minority among elected representatives, particularly at the state and national levels. The Indian experience therefore illustrates the distinction between formal political equality and substantive political participation. The history of women's political participation in India is nevertheless much broader than their presence in formal electoral institutions. Women have participated in social reform movements, nationalist mobilisation, peasant movements, labour movements, environmental movements and campaigns concerning land, forests, food security, education and social justice. During the freedom movement, women participated in mass mobilisation and civil disobedience, while figures such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Aruna Asaf Ali and Sucheta Kriplani demonstrated that women could occupy visible positions of political leadership. However, the participation of prominent women leaders should not be mistaken for broad-based gender equality within political institutions. Political leadership remained concentrated among relatively few women, while large numbers of women continued to experience barriers arising from patriarchy, caste, class, poverty, limited education and unequal access to political networks.

A major transformation occurred through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments of 1992, which fundamentally changed the institutional landscape of grassroots political participation. The 73rd Amendment established constitutional recognition for Panchayati Raj Institutions, while the 74th Amendment provided a constitutional framework for urban local self-government. Among their important provisions was the reservation of not less than one-third of seats for women in local government institutions, including a proportion of chairperson positions. The reservation also operated within seats reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This institutional intervention was historically significant because it moved beyond the assumption that women would enter politics automatically once formal barriers were removed. Instead, it created a constitutional mechanism for ensuring women's presence in local decision-making. The scale of this intervention has been enormous. Local government constitutes the level of governance at which political representatives interact most directly with citizens and deal with everyday developmental concerns. Women elected to Panchayats and municipalities therefore gained opportunities to participate in decisions relating to roads, drinking water, sanitation, education, health services, welfare schemes and local infrastructure. Government data reported in 2026 indicated that approximately 14.5 lakh women were serving as elected representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions as of 19 March 2025, accounting for nearly 46% of elected representatives in these institutions. This figure demonstrates the extraordinary expansion of women's formal political participation at the grassroots level. The importance of local-government reservations extends beyond the number of women occupying seats. Before the constitutional reforms, political leadership in many rural communities was strongly associated with men and established local elites. Reservations disrupted this established pattern by creating institutional opportunities for women to enter electoral politics. Women who might otherwise never have considered contesting an election could acquire direct experience of campaigning, public speaking, administrative procedures, interaction with government officials and engagement with citizens. Political office thus became a practical institution of political learning. Over time, such experiences can contribute to the formation of a broader pool of women capable of seeking political office at higher levels.

Indian local-government experience has also become particularly important within international political science because it has enabled researchers to examine the consequences of women's leadership using unusually strong empirical methods. Some seats were reserved for women through institutional rules that created opportunities to compare political outcomes in areas led by women with those in areas led by men. Research by Raghavendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo, for example, examined the effects of women's leadership in Indian village councils and found that the gender of political leaders influenced the types of public goods receiving attention. In West Bengal, women leaders were more likely to invest in public goods that reflected women's stated preferences, including drinking water and roads. The significance of this research lies in demonstrating that representation can influence policy priorities rather than merely changing the demographic composition of political institutions. Research has also identified important effects on citizens' perceptions of women's political leadership. The work of Lori Beaman, Raghavendra Chattopadhyay, Esther Duflo, Rohini Pande and Petia Topalova examined villages exposed to women leaders and found that repeated exposure to female political leadership reduced gender bias in villagers' assessments of women leaders and increased aspirations among girls. Such findings are important because political representation can have a self-reinforcing effect. When citizens repeatedly observe women performing political roles, political leadership becomes less strongly associated with masculinity. The resulting change in expectations can make future women's political participation more socially acceptable. The Indian case also demonstrates that women's political participation can affect women beyond those who directly hold elected

office. Recent research has found that women politicians can promote women's grassroots political activism and that greater participation in political organisations can increase women's political knowledge and engagement. Political representation may therefore generate a wider democratic effect. A woman who initially becomes involved in a political party through local mobilisation may gain organisational experience and subsequently contest elections. Similarly, women citizens who interact with women representatives may become more aware of governmental institutions and political opportunities. In this sense, political representation can operate as a mechanism through which political capacity is reproduced across generations.

However, the Indian experience should not be interpreted as an uncomplicated success story. Women's access to political office continues to be shaped by patriarchal social norms, socioeconomic inequality and political-party structures. Women may possess the legal right to contest elections while lacking the financial resources, political networks or family support necessary to do so independently. In some communities, political activity by women may still be perceived as incompatible with conventional expectations concerning marriage, motherhood and domestic responsibilities. These factors can affect not only women's decision to contest elections but also their capacity to exercise authority after being elected. The phenomenon commonly described as proxy representation has received considerable attention in discussions of women's reservation in local government. In some cases, male relatives—particularly husbands or other family members—may attempt to exercise influence over women elected to reserved positions. The practice has sometimes been referred to colloquially as the “Sarpanch Pati” phenomenon when husbands of elected women representatives assume informal control over Panchayat affairs. Such practices reveal the persistence of patriarchal structures even after formal political institutions have changed. However, they should not be used to conclude that women's reservations are ineffective. Rather, they demonstrate that institutional reform and social transformation do not always occur at the same pace. Political experience can gradually increase women's administrative knowledge, confidence and autonomy, allowing some representatives to develop independent political identities. Another important dimension of the Indian context is the intersection of gender with caste and social disadvantage. Reservations for women operate alongside constitutional provisions concerning Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, thereby creating opportunities for women belonging to historically marginalised communities to enter local government. This is particularly significant because women from disadvantaged caste and socioeconomic backgrounds may experience multiple layers of exclusion. Their political participation can challenge both gender-based and caste-based assumptions concerning who is entitled to exercise public authority. At the same time, intersectional barriers can make political participation more difficult, demonstrating that women's representation must be evaluated not only by gender but also by social diversity.

Women's participation as voters provides another important dimension of the Indian democratic experience. The Election Commission of India recorded approximately 47.63 crore women electors in the 2024 Lok Sabha election, constituting 48.62% of registered electors. Women's electoral participation has therefore become a major component of India's democratic process. The increasing visibility of women as voters demonstrates that political engagement among women cannot be characterised simply as marginal or passive. Women participate extensively in electoral decision-making, yet their numerical presence as voters remains considerably greater than their representation among national legislators. This creates an important democratic paradox: women constitute a substantial proportion of the electorate but remain significantly underrepresented among those who formulate national legislation. The results of the 2024 Lok Sabha election illustrate this gap. Of the 543 members elected to the Lok Sabha, 74 were women, representing approximately 13.6% of the House. The figure was lower than the 78 women elected in 2019. Thus, despite the increasing political participation of women as voters and the extensive representation of women at the grassroots level, the transition to national parliamentary representation remains incomplete. The difference between grassroots and national representation suggests that barriers become particularly significant as political competition moves upward through the political system. Political parties are central to explaining this gap. Parties determine nominations, distribute organisational responsibilities and influence access to electoral resources. Although women may participate extensively in party organisations, their representation among candidates for competitive parliamentary constituencies can remain limited. The issue is consequently not simply whether women are willing to enter politics or whether voters are prepared to elect them. It also concerns whether political parties are willing to nominate women in constituencies where they have a realistic opportunity to win and whether women are given access to the networks and resources required for competitive campaigns. The passage of the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023, popularly known as the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, represents a major institutional development in this regard. The amendment provides for reservation of approximately one-third of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, including within the relevant reserved categories for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Its implementation is linked to delimitation following the relevant census process. The

constitutional amendment is significant because it extends the principle of affirmative representation that has operated at the grassroots level into the national and state legislative sphere.

The potential significance of this reform extends beyond the arithmetic increase in the number of women legislators. If implemented effectively, it could create a much larger institutional pathway for women to enter state and national politics. Women who acquire experience in Panchayats and municipalities could potentially progress into state legislatures and Parliament, creating a more continuous political leadership pipeline. Such a development could gradually weaken the historical concentration of political power within predominantly male networks. However, the ultimate impact will depend upon implementation, delimitation, political-party behaviour, the distribution of reserved constituencies and the extent to which women representatives are able to exercise independent authority. The Indian experience therefore demonstrates that women's political empowerment requires more than simply granting formal rights. Constitutional guarantees created the foundation of political equality, local-government reservations dramatically expanded women's participation, and the 2023 constitutional amendment established a framework for greater representation in higher legislatures. Yet social attitudes, economic inequality, political-party gatekeeping and patriarchal practices continue to influence the extent to which women can convert political presence into political power. The most significant achievement of India's approach may consequently be the creation of a large-scale institutional experiment in women's political leadership. Millions of women have acquired direct experience of electoral politics through local government. This experience has challenged conventional understandings of political authority and provided empirical evidence that women's leadership can affect public priorities, political participation and attitudes towards gender. At the same time, the comparatively low proportion of women in the Lok Sabha demonstrates that grassroots inclusion has not yet translated into equivalent representation at the national level. The future trajectory of women's political leadership in India will therefore depend on whether the country can transform participation into sustained political power. This requires strengthening women's independent capacity to govern, improving access to political training and resources, encouraging political parties to promote women beyond reserved positions, protecting women representatives from harassment and violence, and addressing social norms that restrict women's public participation. Equally important is the need to ensure that women from different caste, class, tribal, regional and socioeconomic backgrounds have genuine opportunities to exercise political leadership.

CONCLUSION

Women's political participation and leadership are essential to the development of genuinely representative and inclusive democracy. Although women's representation in political institutions has increased globally, substantial inequalities remain, particularly in access to senior leadership and decision-making authority. The Indian experience demonstrates that constitutional and institutional interventions, especially reservations in local government, can significantly expand women's political participation and create opportunities for new generations of women leaders. However, numerical representation alone cannot guarantee substantive empowerment. Persistent patriarchal attitudes, economic inequalities, political-party gatekeeping, violence and unequal access to resources continue to influence women's political careers. India's experience therefore suggests that the central objective must be to move beyond mere presence towards meaningful political power, autonomy and influence. Strengthening women's leadership is ultimately not only a matter of gender justice but also an essential condition for a more representative, responsive and democratic political system.

References

1. Bjarnegård, E. (2013). *Gender, informal institutions and political recruitment: Explaining male dominance in parliamentary representation*. Palgrave Macmillan. Accessed August 17, 2026.
2. Cheng, C., & Tavits, M. (2011). Informal influences in selecting female political candidates. *Political Research Quarterly*, 64(2), 460–471. Accessed August 17, 2026.
3. Dahlerup, D. (Ed.). (2006). *Women, quotas and politics*. Routledge. Accessed August 19, 2026.
4. de Jong, J. C., & Mügge, L. M. (2024). Political representation and intersectionality: Perspectives of ethnically/racially minoritized citizens. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 31(1), 151–177. Accessed August 27, 2026.
5. Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review*, 109(3), 573–598. Accessed August 17, 2026.
6. Fox, R. L., & Lawless, J. L. (2010). If only they'd ask: Gender, recruitment, and political ambition. *The Journal of Politics*, 72(2), 310–326. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381609990752> Accessed September 11, 2026.
7. Gatto, M. A. C., & Radojevic, M. (2025). Choosing women: Party elites' preferences in the candidate selection process. *British Journal of Political Science*, 55, e36. Accessed September 17, 2026.
8. Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2025). *Women in parliament 1995–2025*. Accessed September 01, 2026.

9. Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2026). Women in parliament in 2025. September 17, 2026.
10. Jarman, A. (2026). Clicks and stones: Women politicians and gendered hostility online. *British Journal of Political Science*. Accessed September 17, 2026.
11. Krook, M. L. (2017). Violence against women in politics. *Journal of Democracy*, 28(1), 74–88. Accessed September 17, 2026.
12. Kunovich, S., & Paxton, P. (2005). Pathways to power: The role of political parties in women's national political representation. *American Journal of Sociology*, 111(2), 505–552. Accessed September 17, 2026.
13. O'Brien, D. Z., & Rickne, J. (2016). Gender quotas and women's political leadership. *American Political Science Review*, 110(1), 112–126.
14. Accessed August 20, 2026.
15. OECD. (2019). SIGI 2019 global report: Transforming challenges into opportunities. OECD Publishing. Accessed September 1, 2026.
16. OECD. (2025). Gender equality in a changing world: Taking stock and moving forward. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/e808086f-en> Accessed September 1, 2026.
17. OECD. (2025). Government at a glance 2025. OECD Publishing. Accessed September 12, 2026.
18. Strolovitch, D. Z., Wong, J. S., & Proctor, A. (2017). A possessive investment in white heteropatriarchy? The 2016 election and the politics of race, gender, and sexuality. *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 5(2), 353–363. Accessed August 26, 2026.
19. UN Women. (2014). Violence against women in politics. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. Accessed August 26, 2026.
20. UN Women. (2021). Guidance note: Preventing violence against women in politics. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. Accessed September 1, 2026.
21. UN Women. (2024). World survey on the role of women in development 2024: Harnessing social protection for gender equality, resilience and transformation. United Nations. Accessed September 10, 2026.
22. Van der Pas, D. J., & Aaldering, L. (2020). Gender differences in political media coverage: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Communication*, 70(1), 114–143. Accessed August 11, 2026.
23. Chattopadhyay, R., & Duflo, E. (2004). Women as policy makers: Evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India. *Econometrica*, 72(5), 1409–1443. Accessed September 17, 2026.
24. Dahlerup, D. (Ed.). (2006). Women, quotas and politics. Routledge. Accessed September 17, 2026.
25. Goyal, T. (2024). Representation from below: How women's grassroots party activism promotes equal political participation. *American Political Science Review*, 118(3), 1415–1430. Accessed September 17, 2026.
26. Goyal, T. (2025). Local political representation as a pathway to power: A natural experiment in India. *American Journal of Political Science*, 69(2), 516–530. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12840> Accessed September 17, 2026.
27. Ministry of Panchayati Raj. (2026, February 11). Tackling of proxy representation of elected women representatives. Government of India, Press Information Bureau. Accessed September 17, 2026.
28. O'Brien, D. Z., & Rickne, J. (2016). Gender quotas and women's political leadership. *American Political Science Review*, 110(1), 112–126. Accessed September 17, 2026.
29. Phillips, A. (1995). The politics of presence. Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press. Accessed September 17, 2026.
30. Wängnerud, L. (2009). Women in parliaments: Descriptive and substantive representation. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 12, 51–69. Accessed September 17, 2026.
31. Beaman, L., Chattopadhyay, R., Duflo, E., Pande, R., & Topalova, P. (2009). Powerful women: Does exposure reduce bias? *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 124(4), 1497–1540. <https://doi.org/10.1162/qjec.2009.124.4.1497> Accessed September 17, 2026.
32. Chattopadhyay, R., & Duflo, E. (2004). Women as policy makers: Evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India. *Econometrica*, 72(5), 1409–1443. Accessed September 17, 2026.
33. Election Commission of India. (2025). Atlas 2024: General elections to Lok Sabha 2024. Election Commission of India. Accessed September 10, 2026.
34. Election Commission of India. (2024). General election to Lok Sabha 2024: Statistical reports. Election Commission of India. Accessed September 11, 2026.
35. Government of India. (1950). The Constitution of India. Ministry of Law and Justice. Accessed September 12, 2026.
36. Government of India. (1992). The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992. Ministry of Panchayati Raj. Accessed September 13, 2026.
37. Government of India. (1992). The Constitution (Seventy-Fourth Amendment) Act, 1992. Government of India. Accessed September 14, 2026.

38. Government of India. (2023). The Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023. Gazette of India. Accessed September 15, 2026.
39. Ministry of Panchayati Raj. (2026). Participation, representation, and decision-making. Government of India. Accessed September 16, 2026.