
**THE DYNAMICS OF WOMEN’S POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT
IN INDIA: DEVELOPMENTS, BARRIERS AND FUTURE PATHWAYS**

Sanjeevakumar Ganiger¹ & Prakash S. Kattimani²

¹Research Scholar, Dept. of Political Science, Rani Channamma
University, Belagavi.

²Associate Professor, Dept. of Political Science, Rani Channamma
University, Belagavi.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18850525>

ABSTRACT:

Women’s political empowerment in India has evolved significantly since independence, marked by increased representation, legal reforms and grassroots leadership. Despite these gains, entrenched socio-cultural norms, institutional barriers and economic disparities continue to hinder full political participation. This article examines the historical trajectory of women’s political empowerment in India, identifies persistent challenges, and outlines pathways for strengthening women’s engagement in governance and public decision-making. Through a combination of historical evidence, policy analysis, and contemporary socio-political trends, this paper highlights both achievements and unresolved gaps in India’s democratic landscape.

KEYWORDS:

Women Empowerment, Political Participation, Equality, Representation, Democracy.

.....

Introduction

Political empowerment refers to the process through which individuals or groups gain the ability to influence political decisions, occupy leadership roles, and participate actively in policy-making processes. Women's political empowerment is not only a matter of equity but also essential for effective governance, as studies consistently show that gender-diverse leadership improves policy outcomes and accountability. In India, women were active participants in the freedom movement, yet post-independence political representation of women remained minimal due to socio-cultural barriers, patriarchal norms, and institutional biases.

The Indian Constitution provides the legal framework for gender equality, guaranteeing equal rights, non-discrimination, and the right to political participation (Articles 14 to 16). Over time, various reforms, such as the reservation of seats in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs), have facilitated women's entry into political spaces. Despite these initiatives, women's representation in higher political institutions, State legislatures, Parliament and ministerial positions remains below global averages. Therefore, understanding the dynamics, achievements and challenges of women's political empowerment is crucial for fostering an inclusive democracy and ensuring that half of the population has a meaningful voice in governance.

Objectives

- To examine the evolution of women's political participation in India.
- To analyze legal and institutional support for women's empowerment.
- To identify barriers limiting women's political involvement.
- To assess current trends in women's representation.
- To suggest strategies to enhance gender-inclusive governance.

Methodology

This article employs a qualitative, descriptive and analytical approach to examine women's political empowerment in India. The methodology is based on secondary data analysis including a review of existing literature, policy documents, historical movements and recent developments in Indian politics.

Review of Literature

Women in Politics in India: Challenges and Opportunities by Verma, S. (2017), *Journal of Political Studies*, 24(2), 45–63.

In this Journal, Verma notes that political parties' male-dominated structures and lack of mentorship opportunities restrict women's access to leadership positions, illustrating the importance of intra-party reforms.

Women and Grassroots Politics by Manu Bhaskar (2000), views that gender equality is a prerequisite for effective participation of women. Domesticity of women, masculine nature of political activity, backward consciousness, existing political culture, lack of economic security are the major obstacles and deterrents for women's fuller participation in politics.

Strategies for Empowering Women by Susheela Kaushik (1993), suggests some significant strategies for empowering women and to ensure their fuller participation in PRIs. She views that political education, political information and political training are the three important forces for empowering women.

Constitutional and Legislative Measures

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women. Within the framework of a democratic polity, our laws, development policies, plans and programmes have aimed at women's advancement in different spheres.

- Equality before law for women (Article 14)
- The State not to discriminate against any citizen on the grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex. (Article 15)
- The State to make any special provision in favor of women and children. (Article 15 (3))
- Equality of opportunity for all citizens in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the State (Article 16)
- To promote justice on a basis of equal opportunity and to provide free legal aid by suitable legislation or scheme or in any other way to ensure that opportunities for securing justice are not denied to any citizen by reason of economic or other disabilities (Article 39 A)

- The State to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people and to protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation (Article 46)
- Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the SC & ST) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat to be reserved for women and such seats to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat. (Article 243 D (3))
- Not less than one-third of the total number of offices of Chairpersons in the Panchayats at each level to be reserved for women. (Article 243 D (4))
- Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Municipality to be reserved for women and such seats to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Municipality. (Article 243 T (3))
- Reservation of offices of Chairpersons in Municipalities for the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes and women in such manner as the legislature of a State may by law provide. (Article 243 T (4))
- The 106th Constitutional Amendment Act, 2023, also known as the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, mandates a 33% (one-third) reservation for women in the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies, and the Delhi Assembly.
 - » One-third of the seats in Lok Sabha shall be reserved for women. It includes one-third horizontal reservation in seats reserved for SC and ST – Article 330A.
 - » One-third of the seats in state assemblies shall be reserved for women. It includes one-third horizontal reservation in seats reserved for SCs and ST. Article 332A.
 - » One-third of the seats in the assembly of the National Capital Territory of Delhi shall be reserved for women. It includes one-third horizontal reservation in seats for SC. Article 239AA.

Legal Provisions

To uphold the Constitutional mandate, the State has enacted various legislative measures intended to ensure equal rights, to counter social discrimination and various forms of violence and atrocities and to provide support services especially to working women. Such as:

- The Special Marriage Act, 1954
- The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955
- The Hindu Succession Act, 1956 & 2005
- Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956
- The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 & 1995
- Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961
- The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971
- The Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1976
- The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976
- The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006
- Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986
- Domestic Violence Act, 2005
- Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Rules, 2013

Grassroots Empowerment through Panchayat Raj Institutions

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments were watershed moments, granting women representation in local governance. Today, women hold leadership positions in millions of gram panchayats, municipal councils, and ward committees. Evidence indicates that women leaders often prioritize social welfare, healthcare, and education, highlighting the transformative impact of grassroots political participation.

National and State Level Political Representation

While local governance has seen substantial female representation, national and state-level politics remain male-dominated. As of 2023, women constitute roughly 14 to 15% of India's Parliament and about 10 to 12% of state assemblies. High-profile women politicians, including ministers and state chief ministers, have demonstrated leadership capacity, yet they remain exceptions rather than the norm. Cultural resistance, party hierarchies and lack of political mentorship continue to hinder broader participation.

Role of Civil Society and Advocacy Networks

Women's political engagement has been strengthened by civil society interventions, advocacy networks and leadership programs. Initiatives like the Mahila Samakhya Programme and NGOs like SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) provide training in political literacy, electoral campaigning and governance. These programs build confidence, foster community support and challenge patriarchal perceptions of women's leadership.

Barriers to Women's Political Participation

Women face numerous barriers to meaningful political participation throughout the electoral process, limiting their ability to exercise electoral rights effectively. Traditional gender roles, stereotypes and discriminatory norms often marginalize women, while the male-dominated model of politics tends to undervalue their contributions. Within political parties, women frequently encounter a lack of support, exclusion from decision-making structures and limited access to financial resources necessary to run campaigns or be considered significant party members. Legal frameworks that are gender-blind, combined with limited political education, information, and experience, further hinder their engagement. Many women also bear a dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities, reducing the time and energy they can dedicate to politics. Media coverage often perpetuates gender-based biases, while the perception of politics as "dirty" and exposure to violence both within and outside parties discourage participation. Additionally, in systems where candidates must provide their own election monitors, women may lack adequate safeguards for their candidacies. Collectively, these obstacles create a challenging environment for women as candidates, party members and political activists, undermining their full participation in political life.

Future Pathways for Strengthening Women's Political Empowerment

Future pathways for strengthening women's political empowerment focus on moving beyond mere numerical representation to ensuring meaningful participation, decision-making influence and the dismantling of structural barriers. Key strategies involve legal reforms, capacity building, digital inclusion and addressing the "sarpanch pati" (proxy representation) system to ensure women are effective, not just elected.

Legislative and Institutional Reforms

- Implementation of Reservation Policies: Swift and effective implementation of laws like India's Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (2023), which mandates 33% reservation for women in Parliament and State Assemblies, is critical.
- Strengthening Local Governance: Building on the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, focusing on training for elected women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to prevent "sarpanch pati" (male relatives acting for women) and increase authentic leadership.
- Gender-Responsive Budgeting: Forcing accountability for funds allocated for women's development, as many departments often fail to spend the budgeted amount.

Capacity Building and Mentorship

- Targeted Training Programs: Providing specialized training in campaigning, public speaking, governance and policy formulation to equip women candidates with necessary skills.
- Mentorship and Networking: Establishing, sustaining and strengthening networks for women politicians to share experiences and build solidarity.
- Leadership Development: Promoting initiatives like the "Pathways to Politics" programs, which provide non-partisan training and support to boost women's political careers.

Technology and Digital Inclusion

- Digital Skills Training: Enhancing digital literacy for rural women to reduce the digital divide and enable better access to information and political platforms.
- Safer Online Spaces: Developing robust legal and technological frameworks to combat technology-facilitated gender-based violence and online harassment, which deter women from entering politics.

Shifting Societal and Cultural Norms

- Changing Mindsets: Addressing deep-seated patriarchal norms and stereotypes that view politics as a male domain through sustained community-level campaigns.
- Actively involving men and women in gender equality initiatives to foster a more supportive environment for women's public participation.

Addressing Economic and Safety Barriers

- **Economic Independence:** Strengthening Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and access to microfinance, which are proven to improve women's status and economic independence, directly influencing their political agency.
- **Ensuring Safety:** Implementing strict legal measures to protect women candidates from electoral violence, intimidation, and harassment.

Data-Driven Monitoring

- **Gender-Disaggregated Data:** Regularly collecting and analyzing data on women's participation to monitor progress and identify gaps, such as tracking the number of female journalists and women in CSOs.
- **Rigorous Evaluation:** Conducting long-term studies on the impact of female political empowerment on policy outcomes e.g., education, health, and infrastructure.

Conclusion

Women's political empowerment in India has made remarkable strides, particularly at the grassroots level. Constitutional guarantees, legislative reforms and civil society interventions have expanded women's political space and fostered leadership development. However, socio-cultural norms, structural limitations and safety concerns continue to restrict full participation. Achieving meaningful gender parity in politics requires a multi-dimensional approach combining legislative reforms, party-level strategies, capacity building programs and societal transformation. By ensuring equitable participation of women in political decision-making, India can strengthen democratic governance, enhance policy inclusivity and reflect the aspirations of its diverse population.

References:

1. A. Basu, Gender and politics in India: Challenges and opportunities.,(2020). Sage Publications, New Delhi.
2. L. Beaman, E. Duflo, R. Pande, and P. Topalova, “Women political leaders and policy priorities: Evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India,” *American Economic Review*, vol. 102, no. 5, pp. 120–134, 2012.
3. R. Chattopadhyay and E. Duflo, “Women as policy makers: Evidence from a randomized policy experiment in India,” *Econometrica*, vol. 72, no. 5, pp. 1409–1443, 2004.
4. R. Chowdhury, “Political participation of women in India: Historical and contemporary perspectives,” *Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 45–60, 2016.
5. R. Kaur, “Women and democracy in India: Legal frameworks and political rights,” *Indian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 79, no. 2, pp. 215–230, 2018.
6. S. Raj and P. Bhattacharya, “Women in local governance: Impact of reservations on rural development,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 54, no. 7, pp. 22–30, 2019.
7. M. Saxena, “Women’s representation in Indian politics: Trends, challenges, and reforms,” *Asian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 55–73, 2021.
8. N. Singh, “Enhancing women’s political leadership in India: Strategies and policy measures,” *Contemporary Politics*, vol. 28, no. 4, pp. 401–418, 2022.
9. J. Thomas, “Barriers to women’s political participation in India: Party politics and structural limitations,” *Indian Political Review*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 90–110, 2017.
10. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news>
11. <https://www.undp.org/governance/womens-political-participation>

Funding:

This study was not funded by any grant.

Conflict of interest:

The Authors have no conflict of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

About the License:

© The Authors 2024. The text of this article is open access and licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.