

# Women's Political Participation in India: Progress, Challenges, and the Path Forward

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## Abstract

This research paper examines the evolving landscape of women's political participation in India, analyzing trends in voter turnout, legislative representation, and policy interventions. While India has witnessed historic milestones in female voter participation, with women's turnout surpassing men's in recent elections, significant disparities persist in elected representation. Women constitute approximately 14% of national parliamentarians despite comprising nearly half the population. The paper explores the impact of constitutional amendments, particularly the 73rd and 74th Amendments mandating local-level reservations, and the recently passed Women's Reservation Act of 2023. Through analysis of electoral data, legislative frameworks, and socio-cultural barriers, this study provides a comprehensive assessment of achievements and ongoing challenges in ensuring equitable political participation for Indian women.

**Keywords:** Women's political participation, India, Gender representation, Legislative reservations, Political empowerment, Electoral democracy, Women's Reservation Act 2023, Lok Sabha, State assemblies

## 1. INTRODUCTION

India, the world's largest democracy with 1.4 billion people, presents a complex paradox in women's political participation. Women constitute nearly half of India's 950 million registered voters and have made remarkable strides in electoral participation. However, their representation in decision-making bodies remains disproportionately low. This disparity between voting participation and legislative representation raises critical questions about structural barriers, political will, and the pathways to achieving substantive gender equality in India's democratic institutions.

The journey of women's political participation in India began with the independence movement and the adoption of the Constitution in 1950, which granted universal adult suffrage. Over seven decades later, while progress has been significant in some areas, India ranks 143rd globally in women's representation in national parliaments<sup>1</sup>, lagging behind neighboring countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan, as well as most developed democracies.

## 2. Historical Context and Evolution

### 2.1 Pre-Independence Era

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<sup>1</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, Women in National Parliaments Database, January 2025.

The movement for women's political rights in India emerged during the early 20th century, closely intertwined with the broader independence movement. In 1931, women leaders including Begum Shah Nawaz and Sarojini Naidu submitted a memorandum to the British Prime Minister advocating for women's rights in the new Constitution. Under British colonial rule, most Indians, regardless of gender, lacked voting rights. However, some provincial legislatures began granting limited suffrage to women. Madras became the first state to grant property-owning women the right to vote in 1921, though these rights remained restricted by property ownership and literacy requirements.

## 2.2 Post-Independence Framework

The adoption of India's Constitution in 1950 marked a watershed moment, granting universal adult suffrage to all citizens regardless of gender, caste, or economic status. This progressive step placed India ahead of many Western democracies in recognizing women's political rights. The Constitution also provided for reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in legislatures, establishing a precedent for affirmative action in political representation. Despite this constitutional guarantee, women's actual participation remained minimal in the early decades. In the first Lok Sabha (1951), only 22 women were elected, constituting merely 5% of total members. The patriarchal social structure, limited educational opportunities, and economic dependence significantly constrained women's political engagement.

## 3. Current Status of Women's Political Participation

### 3.1 Voter Turnout: A Historic Shift

India achieved a historic milestone in 2019 when, for the first time in its electoral history, women's voter turnout exceeded that of men. Female voters participated at a rate of 67.2% compared to 67% for male voters<sup>2</sup>. This trend continued in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, with women's turnout at 65.78% nearly matching men's 65.8%. This transformation is particularly significant given that women's turnout lagged substantially behind men's in earlier decades—in 1962, only 46.6% of eligible women voted.

The gender gap in voter registration has also narrowed considerably. In 2024, there were 946 female electors per 1,000 male electors, up from 926 in 2019<sup>3</sup>. States like Kerala and Puducherry recorded the highest percentages of female voters at 51.56% and 53.03% respectively. This surge in female voter participation has been attributed to several factors: improved security at polling stations, targeted outreach by the Election Commission of India, door-to-door registration drives, and the increasing political awareness among women across socioeconomic strata.

### 3.2 Legislative Representation: Persistent Underrepresentation

While voter turnout has improved dramatically, women's representation in elected bodies tells a different story. As of 2024:

Institution	Women's Representation	Total Members
Lok Sabha (2024)	74 (13.6%)	543
Rajya Sabha (2023)	Approximately 14%	245
State Assemblies (Average)	Below 10%	Varies by state

<sup>2</sup> Election Commission of India, Statistical Report on General Elections to Lok Sabha 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Election Commission of India, Gender Statistics Report 2024.

Local Bodies (2022)	44%	~3.1 million total
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The contrast between local-level and national-level representation is stark. While women hold 44% of seats in local government bodies (Panchayati Raj Institutions and municipalities), their presence in state assemblies averages below 10%, and national parliament representation remains at approximately 14%. This disparity highlights the impact of reservation policies at the local level and the absence of such mandates at higher levels of governance.

In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, 797 women candidates contested across 543 constituencies, representing 9.5% of total candidates. Only 74 were elected—a decline from 78 in 2019. West Bengal leads with 11 women MPs, reflecting regional variations in political culture and party commitments to gender representation.

#### 4. Legislative Framework and Policy Interventions

##### 4.1 The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992-1993)

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, enacted in 1992 and 1993 respectively, represent landmark legislation in India's journey toward gender-inclusive governance<sup>4</sup>. These amendments mandated 33% reservation of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (rural local governments) and urban local bodies (municipalities). Additionally, one-third of chairperson positions at all levels were reserved for women.

The impact of these amendments has been transformative. As of 2022, women hold approximately 1.38 million elected positions in local government—the largest number of women in local governance globally<sup>5</sup>. Several progressive states including Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh have further increased reservation to 50%, demonstrating the scalability of such affirmative action.

Research indicates that women representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions have played crucial roles in addressing community needs, particularly in areas such as maternal health, child marriage prevention, clean drinking water access, and education. Their presence has shifted policy priorities to include issues traditionally neglected in male-dominated governance structures.

##### 4.2 The Women's Reservation Act of 2023

On September 21, 2023, India's Parliament passed the Women's Reservation Bill, officially known as the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (Women Power Salutation Act), marking the culmination of a 27-year legislative struggle. The bill passed with overwhelming support—454 votes in favor and only 2 against in the Lok Sabha, and unanimously (214-0) in the Rajya Sabha. President Droupadi Murmu granted assent on September 28, 2023, making it the 106th Constitutional Amendment<sup>6</sup>.

Key provisions of the Act include:

- Reservation of one-third (33%) of total seats in the Lok Sabha, state legislative assemblies, and the Delhi Legislative Assembly for women
- Within the reserved seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, one-third must be allocated to women, ensuring intersectional representation

<sup>4</sup> The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992 and The Constitution (Seventy-Fourth Amendment) Act, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, Annual Report 2022-23.

<sup>6</sup> The Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023, enacted September 28, 2023.

- Reserved seats will be rotated after each delimitation exercise to prevent any constituency from being permanently designated as reserved
- The reservation will continue for 15 years from commencement, with the possibility of extension through Parliamentary legislation

However, implementation has been deferred pending two administrative exercises: the national census and delimitation of constituencies<sup>7</sup>. The census, originally scheduled for 2021, was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and remains stalled. Delimitation—the process of redrawing constituency boundaries based on census data—is currently frozen until 2026. Given that previous delimitation exercises have taken approximately five years, experts estimate the reservation may not be implemented before the 2029 Lok Sabha elections.

Critics have raised concerns about the delayed implementation, viewing it as 'empowerment deferred.' Opposition members, including Congress leader Mallikarjun Kharge, demanded immediate implementation and inclusion of reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBC) women. The exclusion of the Rajya Sabha and state legislative councils from the reservation framework has also been contested, as these bodies currently have even lower female representation than the Lok Sabha.

## **5. Barriers to Women's Political Participation**

### **5.1 Socio-Cultural Barriers**

Deeply entrenched patriarchal norms constitute the most significant obstacle to women's political participation. Traditional gender roles confine women to domestic spheres, with political engagement viewed as incompatible with family responsibilities. In rural areas, women face severe restrictions on mobility and decision-making autonomy, limiting their ability to attend political meetings, campaign, or even vote independently.

Gender stereotypes perpetuate notions of male superiority in leadership, with women's capabilities systematically questioned and undermined. These attitudes are reinforced through media representations, educational curricula, and social narratives that rarely portray women in political leadership roles. The concept of 'proxy representatives'—where male family members control women elected to reserved seats—exemplifies how patriarchal structures subvert even affirmative action measures<sup>8</sup>.

Intersectionality compounds these challenges. Women from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes face multiple layers of discrimination based on caste, class, and gender. Their political priorities are often shaped more by community and caste identities than gender solidarity, fragmenting potential collective action for women's empowerment.

### **5.2 Economic Constraints**

Economic independence is crucial for political participation, yet India's female workforce participation rate remains critically low at below 25%. This economic dependence on male family members severely restricts women's political agency and autonomy. Electoral campaigns require substantial financial resources for rallies, media advertisements, travel, and organizational support—resources to which most women have limited access.

The disparity is particularly acute for women seeking to contest as independent candidates without party backing. Political parties control crucial resources including funding,

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<sup>7</sup> PRS Legislative Research, Analysis of the Women's Reservation Bill, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Women and Child Development, Report on the Status of Women in India, 2015.

organizational machinery, and media access. Without these resources, independent candidature becomes nearly impossible. Moreover, the increasing role of money power and criminalization in Indian politics creates additional barriers for women who lack access to such networks.

### **5.3 Political Party Dynamics**

Political parties play a gatekeeping role in electoral politics, yet their internal structures remain overwhelmingly male-dominated. Women are systematically excluded from key decision-making positions within parties, limiting their influence in candidate selection, policy formulation, and strategic planning. The absence of internal democracy within parties makes it difficult for women to rise through organizational ranks.

When parties do field women candidates, they often relegate them to 'safe' seats where the party is guaranteed to win, or conversely, to 'unwinnable' seats where defeat is expected. This strategic positioning reinforces perceptions of women as tokens rather than serious contenders for power. The lack of voluntary party quotas for women candidates—despite promises in manifestos—reflects the limited political will for gender equality beyond legally mandated requirements.

Political dynasties present another dimension of this challenge. While some women have entered politics through family connections (as daughters, wives, or widows of male politicians), this pathway reinforces rather than challenges patriarchal structures. It does not represent systemic change enabling women from diverse backgrounds to access political leadership.

### **5.4 Structural and Institutional Challenges**

India's first-past-the-post electoral system favors established candidates with strong financial backing and organizational support—advantages typically held by men. The system does not incentivize parties to field women candidates unless legally mandated. High election costs, combined with the prevalence of money power and muscle power in politics, create an environment hostile to women's participation.

Gender-based violence, including harassment and intimidation of women candidates and voters, remains a significant deterrent. The lack of safe political spaces and inadequate security mechanisms exposes women to physical and psychological risks when they engage in political activities. Social media has amplified these challenges, with women politicians facing disproportionate online abuse and character assassination.

Educational disparities, particularly in rural areas, limit women's political literacy and awareness. Lower literacy rates correlate with reduced political participation and civic engagement. States like Kerala, with high female literacy rates, consistently show higher levels of women's political participation, demonstrating the critical link between education and empowerment.

## **6. Comparative Global Perspective**

India's ranking in women's parliamentary representation places it 143rd among 185 countries globally. This position is particularly striking given India's status as the world's largest democracy and its early adoption of universal suffrage. The global average for women in national parliaments stands at approximately 26.5%, nearly double India's 14%.

Countries with quota systems have achieved substantially higher representation. Rwanda leads globally with 61.3% women in parliament, followed by Cuba (53%) and Nicaragua (52%).

Among South Asian nations, Bangladesh has 21% and Pakistan 20% women's representation—both surpassing India. Even within the BRICS grouping, India ranks second-lowest at 15%, just above Iran (6%), while South Africa and Ethiopia have made significant progress through quota implementation.

The United Kingdom recently achieved 40% women's representation in its Parliament, demonstrating that Western democracies continue to advance despite having granted women's suffrage much later than India. This contrast highlights that constitutional guarantees alone are insufficient without sustained political will, institutional reforms, and cultural transformation.

Interestingly, India ranks among the top 20 countries globally in the World Economic Forum's political empowerment index when broader participation metrics are considered, including voting patterns and local-level representation<sup>9</sup>. This paradox—high political engagement at grassroots level versus low representation in higher legislative bodies—underscores the effectiveness of reservation policies at the local level and the urgent need to extend such measures to state and national legislatures.

## **7. Impact of Women's Political Participation**

### **7.1 Policy Outcomes and Governance**

Research on women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions demonstrates tangible impacts on policy priorities and governance outcomes. Studies have documented that women representatives are more likely to prioritize investments in public goods that directly affect women and children, including clean drinking water, sanitation, healthcare facilities, and education infrastructure.

Village councils with women representatives have shown higher rates of implementation for programs addressing child marriage, maternal mortality, and nutritional support. The presence of women in decision-making positions has also improved transparency and reduced corruption in some local bodies, as women representatives face different accountability pressures and community expectations.

However, research also indicates that descriptive representation (having women in office) does not automatically translate to substantive representation (advancing women's interests). Many women representatives in reserved seats face control by male family members or party leaders, limiting their autonomous decision-making. The challenge lies in transforming numerical representation into genuine political empowerment and policy influence.

### **7.2 Electoral Dynamics and Party Competition**

The dramatic increase in women's voter turnout has transformed electoral calculations. Political parties increasingly recognize women as a crucial voting bloc and have begun incorporating gender-specific promises in their manifestos. Cash transfer programs targeting women have emerged as a significant electoral strategy across multiple states, reaching 134 million women (nearly one in five adult women) as of November 2024<sup>10</sup>.

In states like Jharkhand, such programs account for 9.2% of total state expenditure, reflecting the political priority assigned to women voters. While these welfare schemes provide important economic support, critics argue they reinforce women's roles as passive

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<sup>9</sup> World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Kumar, R. (2024). What Lies Behind India's Rising Female Voter Turnout. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

beneficiaries rather than active political agents. The challenge is to channel women's electoral power toward systemic changes in representation and policy-making structures.

## **8. Recommendations and the Path Forward**

### **8.1 Short-term Measures**

Immediate implementation of the Women's Reservation Act: The government should expedite the census and delimitation processes to enable implementation of the 33% reservation in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies. Delaying these exercises perpetuates gender inequality in national and state-level governance.

Extension to upper houses: The Rajya Sabha and state legislative councils should be included in the reservation framework. These bodies currently have even lower female representation and play crucial roles in legislative processes.

Voluntary party quotas: Political parties should adopt internal quotas committing to field at least 33% women candidates in non-reserved constituencies. Several international examples demonstrate that voluntary party commitments can be effective when backed by organizational commitment.

OBC sub-quota: Consideration should be given to providing sub-quotas for OBC women within the overall reservation, addressing the concerns of intersectional marginalization while remaining within constitutional limits on total reservations.

### **8.2 Medium-term Institutional Reforms**

Campaign finance reforms: Implement regulations to reduce the role of money power in elections, including public funding mechanisms and spending caps that create more level playing fields for women candidates.

Internal party democracy: Mandate internal democratic processes within political parties, including transparent candidate selection procedures and reservation of leadership positions for women within party structures.

Capacity building programs: Develop comprehensive training programs for women political leaders, covering campaign management, media engagement, legislative procedures, and policy analysis. These programs should target both current representatives and potential future candidates.

Safety and security measures: Strengthen mechanisms to prevent and address violence against women in politics, including harassment, intimidation, and online abuse. Create safe spaces for women's political engagement and establish accountability for perpetrators.

### **8.3 Long-term Socio-Cultural Transformation**

Educational interventions: Integrate political literacy and civic education into school curricula, emphasizing gender equality in political participation. Focus particularly on rural and marginalized communities where educational disparities are most acute.

Economic empowerment: Implement policies to increase women's workforce participation and economic independence, recognizing this as foundational to political agency. Link economic programs with political awareness and leadership development.

Media representation: Encourage positive media portrayals of women political leaders that challenge gender stereotypes and normalize female leadership. Counter narratives that reduce women to familial relationships or question their competence.

Community engagement: Support grassroots women's movements and autonomous organizations that build political consciousness and collective agency. Create networks connecting local-level women representatives with state and national political forums.

Transformation of patriarchal norms: Engage men and boys in challenging gender stereotypes and supporting women's political participation. Address the structural roots of patriarchy through multi-pronged interventions in family, community, and institutional contexts.

## 9. CONCLUSION

India's journey toward gender-inclusive political participation presents a study in contrasts. The nation has achieved remarkable milestones in women's voter turnout, surpassing men for the first time in 2019 and maintaining near-parity in 2024. At the local governance level, India leads globally with over 1.38 million women elected representatives in Panchayati Raj Institutions, demonstrating the transformative potential of reservation policies.

However, these achievements coexist with persistent underrepresentation in state assemblies and national parliament, where women constitute only 14% of legislators despite comprising half the population. This paradox reveals the limitations of incremental progress and the necessity of structural interventions. The passage of the Women's Reservation Act in 2023 represents a historic legislative achievement after 27 years of advocacy. Yet its delayed implementation highlights ongoing challenges of political will and administrative capacity.

The barriers to women's political participation are deeply entrenched and multifaceted—spanning socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, political party dynamics, and institutional structures. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach combining legal reforms, institutional changes, and socio-cultural transformation. Quotas and reservations, while necessary, are insufficient without accompanying measures to build women's political agency, challenge patriarchal norms, and ensure substantive rather than merely descriptive representation.

The increasing political awareness among women voters, coupled with their demonstrated leadership at the local level, provides grounds for optimism. The challenge for India's democracy is to translate this grassroots engagement into meaningful representation in higher legislative bodies and genuine influence over policy-making processes. Achieving this will require sustained commitment from political parties, civil society organizations, state institutions, and society at large.

As India aspires to become a developed nation by 2047, as envisioned in the Women's Reservation Act's preamble, the full and equal participation of women in political decision-making is not merely a matter of justice—it is essential for inclusive, representative, and effective governance. The success of this endeavor will determine not only the status of women in Indian democracy but the quality and legitimacy of democracy itself.

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