



WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN INDIA: PARTICIPATION, RESERVATION AND THE CHALLENGE OF SUBSTANTIVE DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

Women's political participation is indispensable to representative democracy, yet numerical presence and substantive influence do not automatically coincide. India presents a striking paradox: women participate extensively as voters and have acquired constitutionally protected representation in local government, while their presence in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies remains comparatively limited. This paper examines women's political representation in India through the concepts of descriptive, substantive and symbolic representation. Using a qualitative and analytical methodology supported by recent electoral and institutional evidence, it studies candidate nomination, party structures, socio-economic constraints, political finance, reservation, local-government experience and the continuing debate over legislative quotas. Recent nationwide analysis by the Association for Democratic Reforms reported that women constituted only about 10% of 51,708 candidates examined across the current Lok Sabha and State/UT assembly elections and about 10% of sitting MPs and MLAs covered by the study. These figures illustrate that the central barrier is not simply voter participation but access to candidature and winnable political opportunities. The paper argues that reservation can correct structural underrepresentation, but quotas alone cannot guarantee substantive empowerment. Political parties, campaign finance, leadership development, institutional support and women's autonomy within political organizations remain crucial. The study concludes that gender-inclusive democracy requires a transition from symbolic inclusion to durable political power and policy influence.

Keywords: *women's representation; Indian politics; political participation; reservation; Parliament; gender and democracy; substantive representation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Political equality is a foundational democratic principle. A representative system derives legitimacy not merely from elections but from the capacity of different sections of society to enter political institutions, influence public decisions and compete for leadership. Women constitute approximately half of the population, making their political representation a question of democratic quality rather than a narrow sectoral concern.

India's record is mixed. Women have exercised the franchise since the beginning of the Republic, and constitutional amendments reserving seats in Panchayats and Municipalities created one of the world's largest experiments in gender-based political inclusion. Yet representation at the State and national legislative levels has remained substantially lower than parity.

The issue has acquired renewed importance because women's legislative reservation and delimitation have become central constitutional and federal questions. The debate therefore concerns not only how many women enter legislatures, but how representation is designed, when reservation is implemented and whether increased presence translates into independent political influence.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM

The central research problem is the persistent gap between women's democratic citizenship and their access to legislative power. Rising electoral participation has not produced a proportionate rise in women candidates or legislators. This suggests that underrepresentation cannot be explained simply by voter preferences. Candidate selection, party organization, campaign resources, social norms, political networks and institutional design also shape entry into elected office.

The paper asks: Why does women's legislative representation remain limited despite extensive democratic participation, and what combination of institutional reform and political change can convert descriptive representation into substantive democratic empowerment?

3. OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The objectives are to examine patterns of women's political representation in India; identify structural barriers to candidature and leadership; evaluate the significance and limitations of reservation; distinguish numerical presence from substantive representation; and recommend measures for strengthening women's autonomous participation in political institutions.

The research questions are: (1) What explains the continuing gender gap in legislative representation? (2) How do political parties influence women's access to winnable seats? (3) What lessons emerge from local-government reservation? (4) What are the democratic implications of legislative reservation? and (5) How can increased representation produce meaningful policy and leadership influence?

4. METHODOLOGY

The study uses a qualitative, descriptive and analytical research design. It draws on constitutional provisions, electoral and legislative data, recent reports on women candidates and representatives, and scholarly literature on gender and Indian politics. Contemporary figures are used to illustrate structural patterns rather than to claim that representation is uniform across States or parties.

The conceptual framework distinguishes descriptive representation—the numerical presence of women—from substantive representation, meaning the capacity to influence policies and political priorities, and symbolic representation, in which women's presence alters perceptions about who can legitimately exercise public authority.

5. CONSTITUTIONAL FOUNDATIONS AND THE EVOLUTION OF REPRESENTATION

The Constitution established political equality through universal adult franchise and guarantees of equality. Unlike many democracies where women's suffrage emerged gradually, independent India began with women and men voting on formally equal terms. This was a major democratic achievement.

A second transformation occurred through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which institutionalized reservation for women in rural and urban local bodies. These reforms created opportunities for large numbers of women to acquire experience in campaigning, administration, budgeting and constituency representation.

The local-government experience is important because it challenges the assumption that women lack political interest or leadership capacity. However, it also demonstrates that entry into office does not automatically remove social constraints. Political autonomy, administrative knowledge, access to resources and freedom from proxy control remain relevant to substantive empowerment.

6. THE CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATION GAP

Recent data reveal the continuing scale of underrepresentation. A 2026 report by the Association for Democratic Reforms and National Election Watch analyzed 51,708 candidates contesting the current Lok Sabha and State/UT assembly elections and found that 5,095, or about 10%, were women. Among 4,666 MPs and MLAs covered by the analysis, 464, or about 10%, were women (ADR & NEW, 2026).

These figures are significant because they direct attention toward the supply of political opportunity. If women form only a small proportion of candidates, voters cannot by themselves produce equal representation. Political parties function as gatekeepers because they determine nominations, allocate organizational resources and decide which constituencies are politically prioritized.

The representation gap is therefore not simply an electoral outcome. It is partly produced before polling begins.

7. POLITICAL PARTIES AS GATEKEEPERS

Political parties are central institutions of representative democracy. They recruit leaders, nominate candidates, finance campaigns, organize political communication and structure legislative careers. Consequently, women's representation depends heavily on party-level decisions.

Parties may publicly endorse gender equality while remaining cautious about nominating women in highly competitive constituencies. Arguments about 'winnability' can reproduce existing inequalities when past male dominance is treated as evidence that male candidates are safer choices. A self-reinforcing cycle follows: fewer women receive nominations, fewer acquire legislative experience, and limited experience is then used to justify future exclusion.

Breaking this cycle requires internal party reforms, leadership pipelines, transparent nomination criteria and deliberate placement of women in genuinely competitive seats rather than only symbolically difficult constituencies.

8. SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL BARRIERS

Women's political careers are influenced by unequal access to money, networks, mobility, time and social authority. Campaigning can require substantial financial resources and continuous public engagement. Unequal

domestic responsibilities may make these demands more difficult for women, particularly those without established political families or organizational support.

Political violence, harassment and gendered online abuse can impose additional costs. Digital platforms have expanded political communication but have also created new spaces for targeted intimidation and reputational attacks. These pressures can discourage potential candidates and restrict public participation.

Caste, class, religion, region and rural-urban location further intersect with gender. 'Women' should therefore not be treated as a politically homogeneous category. Inclusive representation requires attention to inequalities among women as well as inequality between women and men.

9. RESERVATION AND THE QUESTION OF CRITICAL PRESENCE

Reservation is designed to address structural exclusion by guaranteeing a minimum institutional presence. The constitutional framework adopted in 2023 created a pathway toward reserving one-third of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, with implementation linked to census and delimitation processes.

The policy case for reservation rests on the proposition that political institutions do not become representative automatically. When informal barriers persist over decades, formal corrective mechanisms can alter candidate recruitment and normalize women as political leaders.

Nevertheless, reservation should not be understood as an endpoint. Numerical representation may increase without equivalent gains in agenda-setting power, committee influence, ministerial authority or internal party leadership. The democratic objective must therefore be both presence and power.

10. REPRESENTATION, DELIMITATION AND FEDERALISM

The contemporary debate over women's reservation intersects with delimitation, making gender representation part of a wider argument about federal balance. Post-2026 reapportionment raises difficult questions because population growth has varied substantially across States. Scholars have therefore examined whether a purely population-based allocation would adequately recognize demographic performance and preserve federal balance (Mehrotra, 2026).

This connection makes implementation institutionally complex. Women's representation is widely supported as a democratic objective, while the method and timing of delimitation involve distinct questions concerning

representation among States. A durable solution should avoid allowing one reform to obscure the constitutional concerns raised by the other.

Gender justice and federal fairness need not be competing principles. Institutional design should seek to expand women's representation while preserving confidence that changes in parliamentary representation are transparent, constitutionally grounded and broadly legitimate.

11. FROM DESCRIPTIVE TO SUBSTANTIVE REPRESENTATION

Descriptive representation matters because legislatures should reflect the societies they govern. It can also produce symbolic effects by making women's political leadership ordinary rather than exceptional. Yet democratic evaluation must ask what representatives are able to do once elected.

Substantive representation concerns influence over legislation, budgets, welfare, security, employment, education, health, property rights and other public priorities. It does not require women representatives to speak only on 'women's issues.' Women are representatives of complete constituencies and possess diverse ideological and policy preferences.

Recent research on inheritance-right reforms in India provides an important reminder that political empowerment can be influenced by economic rights. Evidence published in 2026 indicates that stronger women's inheritance rights increased female candidacy and electoral success, illustrating the relationship between economic autonomy and political participation. This suggests that representation policy should be connected to broader structures of education, property, employment and financial independence.

12. LOCAL GOVERNMENT: ACHIEVEMENTS AND LESSONS

Local-body reservation has substantially expanded women's exposure to electoral politics. Its most important lesson is that institutional opportunity can change political participation. Leadership is not simply a pre-existing resource waiting to be discovered; institutions can create conditions in which leadership develops.

At the same time, experiences of proxy representation demonstrate why formal office must be accompanied by autonomy. Training, access to administrative information, control over official communication and protection from coercion are essential. The policy lesson for higher legislatures is that quotas should be supported by institutional measures that enable elected women to exercise authority independently.

13. MAJOR FINDINGS

- Women's underrepresentation is produced partly at the nomination stage; limited candidature constrains what voters can achieve through elections.
- Political parties are the most important institutional gatekeepers and therefore carry substantial responsibility for correcting the representation gap.
- Reservation can accelerate descriptive representation, but numerical presence alone does not guarantee substantive political influence.
- Local-government reservation demonstrates that institutional opportunities can create new leadership pathways, while also revealing the need to guard against proxy representation.
- Gender intersects with caste, class, religion, region and economic status; policies must therefore avoid treating women as a single homogeneous political constituency.
- Economic autonomy and property rights can strengthen political participation, showing that political empowerment is connected to wider structures of social and economic power.
- The linkage between legislative reservation and delimitation makes implementation a question of both gender justice and federal legitimacy.

14. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Political parties should voluntarily adopt measurable targets for women candidates, including nominations in genuinely winnable constituencies.
- Candidate-selection procedures should become more transparent so that claims of 'winnability' can be evaluated rather than used as an informal barrier.
- Legislative reservation should be implemented through a constitutionally credible process that addresses delimitation and federal concerns transparently.
- Parties and legislatures should invest in leadership development, legislative research support, campaign training and mentoring for first-generation women politicians.
- Political-finance reforms should improve women's access to legitimate campaign resources and reduce dependence on established family or patronage networks.
- Institutions should respond effectively to political violence, intimidation and gendered online harassment without restricting legitimate political speech.
- Women representatives should receive equal opportunities for committee leadership, ministerial responsibility and internal party decision-making.

- Civic and political education should highlight women's leadership as a normal feature of democratic citizenship rather than an exceptional concession.
- Research and official reporting should publish regular gender-disaggregated data on candidature, nominations, electoral success, committee roles and executive positions.

15. CONCLUSION

Women's political representation is a test of the depth of Indian democracy. Formal political equality has existed since the founding of the Republic, and women's participation as voters has become an established feature of electoral politics. Yet access to legislative candidature and political leadership remains unequal.

Reservation can be an important corrective to persistent structural exclusion, but the democratic objective should extend beyond achieving a numerical threshold. Women must possess the institutional resources, autonomy and opportunities necessary to shape policy, lead political organizations and exercise public authority.

The transition from descriptive representation to substantive democracy therefore requires action by political parties, legislatures, electoral institutions and civil society. It also requires attention to economic independence, social inequality and the safety of political participation. A more gender-balanced political system would not merely benefit women; it would strengthen the representative character and legitimacy of Indian democracy itself.

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