



Conference Paper

Advancing Women's Political Participation: The Evolution of Female Representation in India's Governance

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Abstract

India's journey towards gender equality in political representation has been complex. The nation's governance structures have evolved significantly since independence. Women's participation in politics has grown, but challenges persist. This paper examines the historical context of female representation in India's governance. It analyses constitutional provisions and legislative measures promoting gender equality. The research explores milestones in women's political empowerment and current participation levels. Sociocultural barriers and institutional challenges are critically assessed. The paper evaluates initiatives like the “Women's Reservation Bill” and their potential impact. It highlights the contributions of prominent female politicians to India's governance. The study compares India's progress with global standards of female political representation. “It examines the effects of increased women's participation on policy-making and social development. The research identifies strategies to enhance women's role in Indian politics. It emphasises the importance of education, mentorship, and comprehensive policy reforms. The paper concludes by discussing prospects for gender parity in Indian governance. It underscores the ongoing need for efforts to achieve equitable political participation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A. Background on Women's Political Participation Globally

“The global landscape of women's political participation has evolved dramatically over the past century. The first wave of women's suffrage movements in the early 20th century laid the groundwork for broader political involvement. New Zealand led the charge, granting women the right to vote in 1893, followed by countries like Finland, Norway, and Denmark in the early 1900s ^[1]. This progress, however, was not uniform across the globe, with many nations only extending suffrage to women in the latter half of the 20th century.

“In recent decades, there has been a notable increase in women's representation in national parliaments and local governments worldwide. The Inter-Parliamentary Union reports that as of 2021, women constitute 25.5% of national parliamentarians globally, a significant rise from 11.3% in 1995 ^[2]. This progress can be attributed to various factors, including the implementation of gender quotas, changing societal attitudes, and concerted efforts by international organisations and civil society.

Despite these gains, significant regional disparities persist. Nordic countries consistently lead in women's political representation, while many Middle Eastern and North African nations lag. The reasons for these disparities are complex, intertwining cultural, economic, and political factors. Legal frameworks have played a crucial role in advancing women's political participation. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979, has been instrumental in promoting women's rights, including political participation ^[3]. Many countries have since implemented national laws and policies to increase women's representation, such as reserved seats or candidate quotas.

Significance of Female Representation in Governance

The significance of female representation in governance extends far beyond the realms of symbolic equality, touching upon the very core of democratic principles and societal progress. As we delve into this crucial aspect of political participation, it becomes evident that the inclusion of women in decision-making processes is not merely a matter of fairness but a catalyst for comprehensive and sustainable development. At its fundamental level, female representation in governance embodies the essence of democracy - a system that should reflect the diverse voices and experiences of its entire populace. When women occupy positions of power, they bring unique perspectives shaped by their lived experiences, often differing from those of their male counterparts ^[4]. This diversity of thought is instrumental in crafting policies that address the needs of all citizens, not just a privileged few.

Research consistently demonstrates that increased female representation correlates with positive outcomes across various sectors. In the realm of public health, for instance, “countries with higher proportions of women in legislature tend to allocate

more resources towards healthcare and social welfare programs” ^[5]. This trend extends to education, environmental protection, and conflict resolution, where female leaders often prioritise long-term, sustainable solutions.

The impact of women in governance is particularly pronounced in addressing gender-specific issues. Female politicians are more likely to champion causes such as combating gender-based violence, promoting reproductive rights, and advocating for equal pay ^[6]. These efforts not only benefit women directly but also contribute to the overall social and economic well-being of nations. Moreover, the presence of women in leadership roles serves as a powerful catalyst for social change. It challenges deep-seated stereotypes about “women's capabilities and their place in society. Young girls and women see tangible proof that they too can aspire to and achieve positions of influence, fostering a cycle of empowerment and increased political engagement across generations ^[7].

Research Question

1. How have constitutional provisions, legislative measures, and judicial interventions impacted the “level of female representation in India's governance structures at local, state, and national levels”?
2. “What are the key barriers that continue to hinder women's full and effective participation in political processes, and how do these barriers intersect with other social and economic factors?”
3. How does India's progress in advancing women's political participation compare with international standards and best practices, particularly in the context of its commitments under CEDAW and the Sustainable Development Goals?
4. What role can political parties, civil society organisations, and media play in promoting women's leadership and creating an enabling environment for their political participation?

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To evaluate the impact of constitutional provisions, legislative measures, and judicial interventions on female representation in India's governance structures at local, state, and national levels.
2. To identify and analyse the primary barriers hindering “women's full and effective participation in political processes, considering their intersection with socio-economic factors.
3. To compare India's progress in advancing women's political participation with international standards and best practices, particularly in relation to its commitments under “CEDAW and the Sustainable Development Goals”.
4. To develop evidence-based recommendations for enhancing the role of “political parties, civil society organisations, and media in promoting women's leadership” and creating an enabling environment for their political participation.

Historical Context of Women's Political Participation in India

“In the pre-independence era, the Indian women's movement was inextricably linked with the nationalist struggle against British colonial rule. Pioneering figures like Sarojini Naidu, often called the “Nightingale of India,” & “Annie Besant played pivotal roles in both the suffrage movement and the fight for independence ^[8]. Their efforts, along with those of countless other women, challenged not only the colonial power but also the patriarchal norms that had long confined women to the domestic sphere.

The Indian National Congress, founded in 1885, initially had a limited role for women. However, by the “early 20th century, women's participation in the freedom movement had gained momentum. The Swadeshi movement saw women actively boycotting foreign goods and participating in public demonstrations, marking a significant shift in their political visibility ^[9].

The watershed moment came in 1917 when a group of Indian women, led by Sarojini Naidu and Margaret Cousins, presented a demand for universal adult franchise to the British Parliament. Although this demand was not immediately met, it set the stage for future reforms. In 1921, the Madras Legislative Council became the first to grant women's suffrage in India, albeit with property-based restrictions.

Post-independence, the “Constitution of India, adopted in 1950, enshrined the principles of universal adult suffrage and gender equality. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law, while Article 15 prohibits discrimination on grounds of sex” ^[10]. These constitutional provisions provided a legal framework for women's political participation, though translating these rights into reality remained a challenge.

The 1950s and 1960s saw the emergence of women “leaders like Indira Gandhi, who became India's first and, to date, only female Prime Minister in 1966.

Her ascent to power, while significant, was more an exception than the norm in a political landscape still dominated by men. The real push for grassroots political participation came with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts of 1992. These amendments mandated a 33% reservation for women in local governance institutions (Panchayati Raj), marking a turning point in women's political representation at the local level” ^[11].

Legal Framework Supporting Women's Political Participation

A. Constitutional provisions

The Constitution of India, a living document that breathes life into the nation's democratic aspirations, provides a robust legal framework for “women's political participation. This framework is not merely a set of abstract principles but a testament to the founders' vision of an inclusive democracy where gender equality is not just an ideal but a fundamental right.

At the heart of this framework lies Article 14, which enshrines “the principle of equality before the law”. This provision serves as the bedrock for women's political rights, ensuring that no law can discriminate against women in their pursuit of political engagement ^[12]. Complementing this, Article 15 explicitly prohibits discrimination on grounds of sex, thus creating a legal shield against gender-based exclusion in the political sphere.

Article 16 takes this commitment further by guaranteeing “equality of opportunity in matters of public employment”. This provision has been instrumental in breaking glass ceilings, allowing women to enter and excel in various branches of government, including the civil services and judiciary ^[13].

The Constitution's commitment to women's political participation is perhaps most explicitly articulated in Article 325, which mandates “that no person shall be ineligible for inclusion in the electoral rolls on grounds of sex. This provision, when read with Article 326 that guarantees universal adult suffrage, ensures that women have an equal right to vote and participate in the electoral process” ^[14].

A significant leap forward came with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts of 1992. These amendments mandated a minimum of one-third reservation for women in Panchayats and Municipalities, respectively. This move has been transformative, bringing women into the forefront of local governance and decision-making processes ^[15].

The Constitution also empowers “the State to make special provisions for women under Article 15(3). This has been interpreted by the Supreme Court in *Government of A.P. v. P.B. Vijayakumar* to include reservations for women in public employment, thereby opening doors for affirmative action in favour of women's representation ^[16].

Statutory measures

At its core, female representation in governance ensures that the diverse perspectives and experiences of approximately half of the world's population are reflected in decision-making processes. This inclusivity leads to more comprehensive and nuanced policy outcomes that address the needs of a broader spectrum of society. “Research has consistently shown that women in political positions tend to prioritise issues such as education, healthcare, and social welfare, which are often underrepresented in male-dominated political spheres” ^[17].

The presence of women in governance structures also serves as a powerful catalyst for social change. It challenges deep-rooted gender stereotypes and provides visible role models for younger generations, inspiring more women to participate in political processes. This ripple effect contributes to a gradual transformation of societal norms and expectations regarding women's roles in public life ^[18].

From a legal perspective, increased female representation often correlates with the advancement of gender-sensitive legislation. Women legislators are more likely to introduce and support bills that address gender inequalities, such as laws against domestic violence, sexual harassment, and discrimination in the

workplace. For instance, in Rwanda, which boasts the highest percentage of women in parliament globally, female lawmakers have been instrumental in passing legislation on gender-based violence and land rights for women ^[19]. Moreover, the participation of women in governance has been linked to reduced corruption and increased transparency in government operations. A study by the World Bank found a negative correlation between the proportion of women in parliament and the level of corruption, suggesting that gender diversity in political institutions may contribute to more ethical governance practices ^[20].

“In the context of conflict resolution and peacebuilding, female representation takes on additional significance. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 recognises the crucial role of women in preventing conflicts and building sustainable peace. Women's participation in peace processes has been shown to increase the probability of peace agreements lasting at least two years by 20%, and lasting 15 years by 35%” ^[21].

The economic implications of female representation in governance are equally compelling. “Diverse leadership teams, including those in government, tend to make better decisions and achieve superior outcomes. Countries with higher levels of female political representation often exhibit stronger economic growth and a more equitable distribution of resources.

Current State of Women's Political Participation

“The landscape of women's political participation has undergone a significant transformation in recent decades, yet the journey towards parity remains ongoing. As we examine the current state of women's involvement in governance structures globally, we observe a complex tapestry of progress, persistent challenges, and emerging opportunities.

As of 2024, women's representation in national parliaments worldwide stands at an all-time high, with approximately 26.6% of seats held by women. This figure represents a notable increase from 11.3% in 1995, highlighting the steady, albeit slow, progress in political gender equality ^[22]. However, this global average masks significant regional disparities and falls short of the critical mass of 30% female representation, long considered necessary for women to have a substantial impact on political decision-making.

At the forefront of this progress are the Nordic countries, which consistently lead in women's political representation. As of 2024, “Rwanda continues to hold the top position globally, with women occupying 61.3% of seats in its lower house of parliament. This achievement is largely attributed to its constitutional quota system, implemented in the wake of the 1994 genocide, which mandates that 30% of all decision-making bodies be composed of women.

In executive positions, women's representation has seen gradual improvement. As of 2024, 28 countries have a woman serving as Head of State or Government. “This progress, while encouraging, underscores the persistent gender gap at the highest levels of political leadership. The election of Kamala Harris as the first female Vice President of the United States in 2020 and the appointment of Ursula von der Leyen as the first female President of the European Commission in 2019 are emblematic of this incremental advancement.

The implementation of gender quotas has emerged as a powerful tool in accelerating women's political participation. Over 130 countries have adopted some form of gender quota in politics, either through constitutional amendments, electoral laws, or voluntary party quotas ^[23]. While quotas have faced criticism for potentially prioritising quantity over quality of representation, research indicates that they have been effective in breaking down structural barriers and changing perceptions about women's leadership capabilities.

“At the local level, women's participation in governance shows promising trends. In many countries, women's representation in local governments surpasses that at the national level. This grassroots involvement is crucial, as local governance often serves as a stepping stone to higher political office and directly addresses issues that impact women's daily lives.

The digital age has ushered in new opportunities and challenges for “women's political participation. Social media platforms have provided women with powerful tools to mobilise support, raise funds, and amplify their voices. However, these same platforms have also become arenas for online harassment and abuse targeted at women in politics, potentially deterring participation.

The “COVID-19 pandemic has had a complex impact on women's political participation. While the crisis has highlighted the effectiveness of women's leadership in times of crisis, with countries led by women often praised for their handling of the pandemic, it has also exacerbated existing gender inequalities. “The disproportionate burden of unpaid care work falling on women during lockdowns has potentially set back progress in political engagement.

In the realm of international politics and diplomacy, women's representation has seen steady growth. As of 2024, women account for approximately 25% of ambassadors to the United Nations, up from just 10% in 2000 ^[24]. This increase in women's presence in international forums is crucial for ensuring that global policies and agreements are gender-responsive.

Despite these advancements, significant barriers to women's political participation persist. These include cultural stereotypes, unequal access to education and economic resources, lack of party support, and the threat of violence against women in politics. “A 2016 study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union revealed that 82% of women parliamentarians had experienced some form of psychological violence, and 44% had received threats of death, rape, beatings, or abduction” ^[25].

3. FUTURE PROSPECTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the most promising avenues for “advancing women's political participation lies in the realm of education and capacity building. By investing in programs that cultivate political literacy, leadership skills, and civic engagement among women and girls, we can create a robust pipeline of future female leaders. These initiatives should start at the grassroots level, integrating political education into school curricula and community programs. The success of such approaches is evident in countries like Sweden, where long-term investments in gender equality education have contributed to high levels of women's political representation [26].

“Legal frameworks and policy interventions will continue to play a crucial role in shaping the future landscape of women's political participation. While India has made significant strides with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which mandated 33% reservation for women in local governance bodies, there is a pressing need to extend similar provisions to state legislatures and the national parliament. The Women's Reservation Bill, which proposes to reserve 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies for women, represents a critical step in this direction. Its passage and implementation could dramatically alter the face of Indian politics [27].

In the digital age, harnessing technology and social media platforms presents both opportunities and challenges for women's political engagement. Future strategies should focus on leveraging these tools to amplify women's voices, facilitate networking, and mobilise support. However, this must be accompanied by robust measures to combat online harassment and misinformation, which disproportionately affect women in the public sphere. Developing comprehensive digital rights and safety frameworks will be essential to create a more inclusive online political space.

Political parties, as gatekeepers to formal political participation, have a pivotal role to play in shaping prospects. Encouraging parties to adopt voluntary quotas, implement gender-sensitive recruitment processes, and provide mentorship and support systems for women candidates can significantly impact representation. “The success of such measures is evident in countries like South Africa, where the African National Congress's voluntary quota system has contributed to high levels of women's representation in parliament” [28].

Addressing the socio-economic “barriers that hinder women's political participation” will be crucial for sustainable progress. This includes tackling issues such as unequal distribution of unpaid care work, economic disparities, and limited access to resources. Implementing policies that promote work-life balance, provide affordable childcare, and ensure economic empowerment can create an enabling environment for women to engage in politics. “The judiciary has a vital role in safeguarding and advancing women's political rights. Future legal interpretations and judgments should continue to uphold and expand the constitutional guarantees of equality and non-

discrimination. The Supreme Court of India's landmark judgment in *Government of NCT of Delhi v. Union of India*, which emphasised the importance of women's participation in democracy, serves as a guiding light for future jurisprudence in this area” [29].

International cooperation and knowledge sharing will be instrumental in driving progress. India can learn from and adapt best practices from “countries that have achieved higher levels of women's political representation. Engaging with international frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action can provide valuable guidance and accountability mechanisms” [30].

4. CONCLUSION

The journey of women's political participation in India's governance is a testament to the resilience, determination, and evolving nature of the world's largest democracy. As we reflect on the path traversed and the road ahead, it becomes evident that while significant strides have been made, the quest for true gender parity in political representation remains an ongoing endeavour.

India's experience in advancing women's political participation is characterised by a unique interplay of constitutional provisions, legislative measures, judicial interventions, and grassroots movements. “The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments stand as landmark achievements, reserving one-third of seats for women in local governance bodies and paving the way for increased female representation at the grassroots level” [31]. These amendments have not only changed the face of local politics but have also served as a proving ground for women's leadership capabilities.

However, the progress at the national level has been less pronounced. “The Women's Reservation Bill, which proposes to reserve 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies for women, has faced prolonged delays and political resistance. This dichotomy between local and national representation underscores the complex challenges that persist in translating constitutional aspirations into political realities.

The judiciary has played a crucial role in interpreting and expanding the scope of women's political rights. Landmark judgments such as *Government of NCT of Delhi v. Union of India* have emphasised the importance of women's participation as an essential component of a vibrant democracy” [32]. These judicial pronouncements have not only reinforced constitutional guarantees but have also pushed the legislative and executive branches to take concrete steps towards gender equality in governance.

India's journey in advancing “women's political participation must also be viewed through the lens of its international commitments. As a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), India has obligations to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the

political and public life of the country”^[33]. The nation's progress in this realm is thus not only a matter of domestic importance but also of global significance.

The evolving “landscape of women's political participation in India is shaped by a myriad of factors, including socio-cultural norms, economic disparities, educational opportunities, and the changing nature of political discourse. The rise of digital platforms has opened new avenues for women's political engagement while simultaneously presenting challenges in the form of online harassment and disinformation.

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