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Women's Political Participation: Beyond Reservation Policies

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Abstract

Democracy thrives when all citizens, irrespective of gender, caste, class, or community, actively participate in governance and decision-making. Yet, despite constituting nearly half of the population, women remain underrepresented in political institutions worldwide. This gap is not merely numerical but rooted in deeper structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that limit women's influence in shaping policy. India's democratic journey illustrates both progress and paradox. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992-93) mandated one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies, resulting in over 1.4 million elected women representatives the world's largest grassroots empowerment initiative. Some states have even extended the quota to 50%. However, women's representation in Parliament and State Assemblies remains disproportionately low, rarely crossing 15%. The passage of the Women's Reservation Bill (2023), ensuring 33% seats for women in legislatures, is a historic step, though its implementation raises questions of timing and commitment. Globally, India lags behind several nations despite its democratic credentials.¹ According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024), countries like Rwanda (over 60% women in parliament) and Nordic nations (40-46%) demonstrate that political will and supportive structures matter more than economic capacity in achieving gender parity. This contrast underscores a crucial point: reservations are necessary but insufficient. Genuine empowerment requires that women move beyond symbolic presence to substantive participation exercising decision-making power, shaping policies, and challenging patriarchal structures. The debate, therefore, must expand beyond quotas to include reforms in political parties, economic empowerment, gender-sensitive governance, and cultural transformation^[2].

Keywords: Women's political, reservation policies, empowerment, constitutional

Introduction

Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)

The introduction of women's reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 marked a watershed moment in India's democratic and gender empowerment journey. This amendment mandated that one-third of seats in rural local bodies (Panchayats) be reserved for women, both at the level of members and chairpersons. In subsequent years, many states such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, and Rajasthan went further, increasing this quota to 50%, thereby institutionalizing greater gender inclusion at the grassroots level. As a result, India today has over 1.4 million elected women representatives (EWRs)^[3], the largest number of women in political office anywhere in the world. This scale of representation has significantly altered the political landscape at the village level, ensuring that women are no longer passive beneficiaries of policies but active participants in governance. The impact of women's leadership in PRIs has been particularly visible in sectors traditionally aligned with community welfare. ⁴Women sarpanches and ward members have often prioritized access to clean drinking water, construction of toilets, and better waste management, directly addressing issues that affect household and community health. Elected women representatives have also played a critical role in improving school enrollment, especially for girls, monitoring teachers' attendance, and advocating for mid-day meal programs. Many women leaders have supported maternal health initiatives, vaccination drives, and Anganwadi services, reflecting a strong focus on child and maternal welfare.

Additionally, women in leadership positions have challenged practices such as child marriage, domestic violence, and caste-based discrimination at the village level, bringing gender and social justice concerns into local governance. Scholarly studies and government reports suggest that women leaders often allocate resources differently from men, with a stronger emphasis on community welfare rather than prestige projects ^[5]. For instance, research by Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) demonstrated that women-headed panchayats invested more in drinking water and roads that directly benefited households, while male-headed ones often focused on projects with higher visibility. Despite these achievements, challenges persist. In some areas, women sarpanches face proxy leadership, where male relatives informally exercise authority on their behalf. Additionally, social norms, lack of training, and limited financial autonomy can restrict the effectiveness of women's participation. However, even in such cases, the reservation policy has created new spaces for women's political visibility and voice, breaking long-standing patriarchal barriers. In essence, women's representation in PRIs has gone beyond numbers, reshaping governance priorities, expanding democratic participation, and laying the foundation for substantive gender empowerment at the grassroots level ^[6].

Women's Bill Debate

The Women's Reservation Bill, passed in 2023, represents a landmark step toward achieving gender parity in India's higher political institutions. This legislation provides for 33 percent reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, aiming to significantly increase women's representation at the national and state levels. While India has made substantial progress in empowering women at the grassroots through Panchayati Raj Institutions, women continue to be underrepresented in higher legislative bodies, often occupying less than 15 percent of seats ^[7]. The passage of this bill seeks to address this disparity by institutionalizing women's participation in decision-making at the policy-making level. Beyond mere numerical inclusion, the bill is expected to enhance substantive representation, ensuring that women's perspectives, priorities, and concerns are adequately reflected in legislative processes ^[8]. However, challenges remain in terms of effective implementation, as political parties must actively nominate women candidates in winnable constituencies, and societal attitudes must evolve to accept women as equal leaders. Despite these hurdles, the Women's Reservation Bill marks a historic policy intervention that complements grassroots empowerment initiatives, offering a pathway toward a more inclusive, equitable, and gender-sensitive political landscape in India ^[9].

Global Comparisons

Global comparisons provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of reservation policies and the broader factors that promote women's political participation. Countries like Rwanda, Mexico, and Sweden demonstrate that numerical quotas, when combined with a supportive political culture and institutional mechanisms, can transform women's participation from symbolic presence to substantive influence ^[10]. In Rwanda, women occupy over 61 percent of parliamentary seats, a remarkable achievement resulting

from post-genocide constitutional reforms and strong political commitment to gender equality. Similarly, Mexico, with 50 percent women's representation in its legislature, has successfully implemented gender quotas alongside strict enforcement mechanisms and incentives for political parties to nominate women candidates in winnable constituencies. Sweden, often cited as a model for gender equality, maintains approximately 46 percent female ^[11] representation in parliament, reflecting not only policy interventions but also societal acceptance, gender-sensitive party structures, and progressive cultural norms. These examples highlight that effective representation requires more than legislation; it demands a conducive political environment, active enforcement, and cultural support to enable women to participate meaningfully in governance. For India, these global experiences underscore that while quotas are necessary, complementary measures including party reforms, capacity building, and societal change are essential to ensure that women's political participation is both inclusive and impactful ^[12].

Beyond Numbers: The Limits of Reservation

While reservation policies have successfully increased descriptive representation by ensuring that more women occupy political positions, they do not automatically guarantee substantive representation, which involves actual influence over policy, decision-making, and power structures. In many Panchayati Raj Institutions, for example, women leaders are sometimes treated as figureheads, with male relatives informally exercising authority a phenomenon popularly referred to as the "Sarpanch Pati syndrome" ^[13]. Additionally, political parties often act as gatekeepers by nominating women in unwinnable or less competitive constituencies, thereby limiting their real chances of exercising political influence. Structural barriers also constrain women's participation; these include lack of financial resources to run effective campaigns, gender bias in media coverage, and the persistent threat of harassment or violence in political spaces. Intersectional inequalities further exacerbate these challenges, as women from marginalized castes, tribal communities, or religious minorities face compounded disadvantages that restrict their access to leadership roles and decision-making arenas. Collectively, these limitations highlight that while reservations are a necessary step toward gender equality in politics, they are insufficient on their own; meaningful empowerment requires complementary reforms addressing party structures, socio-economic inequalities, and cultural norms that hinder women's full participation in political life ^[14].

Beyond Reservation: Pathways to Substantive Participation

Meaningful political empowerment for women requires moving beyond reservations to address structural, institutional, and socio-cultural barriers. Reforming political parties is crucial, as internal party democracy and the adoption of gender quotas in candidate selection can enhance women's participation across all levels of governance. Economic empowerment also plays a central role ^[15] financial independence and access to campaign resources enable women to contest elections on equal footing, and state funding of elections could further reduce the gender gap in political financing. Capacity building and

leadership training programs, focused on governance, law, and public administration, can equip women with the skills needed to move beyond symbolic roles and exercise substantive influence. Gender-sensitive governance is equally important, as mainstreaming gender considerations in policy-making across sectors such as health, education, and employment ensures that women's presence in political institutions translates into tangible policy outcomes ^[16]. Addressing violence against women in politics, including online harassment, intimidation, and physical threats, requires robust legal and institutional safeguards to create a safe environment for participation. Finally, transforming social attitudes is essential; patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes must be challenged through education, media campaigns, and active engagement by civil society, creating a culture that values and supports women's leadership. Collectively, these measures provide a comprehensive pathway for women to exercise meaningful political power beyond the numerical gains achieved through reservation policies ^[17].

Global Lessons

India can gain valuable insights from international experiences in enhancing women's political participation, as these examples highlight both the potential and the mechanisms for translating numerical representation into substantive empowerment.¹⁸ In Rwanda, the post-genocide reconstruction period provided a unique political and social context in which women's leadership became essential for rebuilding the nation. Constitutional guarantees, combined with a strong political commitment to gender equality, allowed women to occupy over 60 percent ^[19] of parliamentary seats, fundamentally reshaping the legislative agenda to include issues such as healthcare, education, and social welfare. Beyond quotas, Rwanda's success demonstrates the importance of political will, legal frameworks, and societal endorsement in promoting meaningful participation ^[20]. Nordic countries, including Sweden, Norway, and Finland, illustrate a different but equally instructive model. High female representation in politics is not achieved solely through quotas; ^[21] it is supported by comprehensive social policies such as accessible childcare, parental leave for both genders, maternity benefits, and proactive measures to ensure equal pay. These policies reduce structural barriers to women's participation, allowing them to balance family responsibilities with public service and leadership roles. Moreover, strong civic culture, gender-sensitive political parties, and widespread societal acceptance of women as leaders create an enabling environment where women can exercise influence effectively ^[22].

In Latin America, countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, and Mexico have implemented electoral gender quotas coupled with strict enforcement mechanisms, including penalties for non-compliance by political parties ^[23]. These measures have significantly increased women's presence in legislatures and ensured that quotas lead to substantive rather than symbolic representation. Research shows that female legislators in these countries are more likely to advocate for social policies, education reforms, and health initiatives, highlighting the policy impact of genuine participation ^[24]. These global experiences collectively underline a crucial lesson for India: achieving gender parity in politics requires more than legislative mandates ^[25].

Quotas must be complemented by institutional reforms, socio-economic support systems, capacity-building initiatives, and cultural transformation that challenges patriarchal norms. By learning from these international models, India can create a political ecosystem where women are not only present but are empowered to influence policy, set agendas, and lead decision-making processes, making their participation truly inclusive, meaningful, and transformative.

Conclusion

Women's political participation cannot be reduced to a debate on reservations alone. While quotas have opened the doors of governance and increased the numerical presence of women in political institutions, the true challenge lies in ensuring that women not only enter politics but also exercise meaningful influence over policies and decision-making processes. Achieving genuine gender parity requires comprehensive reforms in political party structures, access to financial resources, capacity-building programs, and the transformation of cultural and societal mindsets that continue to marginalize women. A democracy that sidelines half of its population from decision-making remains incomplete, regardless of legislative milestones. Only by moving beyond reservations through structural, institutional, and social reforms can India ensure that women's political participation is substantive, inclusive, and transformative, thereby fulfilling the broader promise of equitable governance and social justice.

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