

## Women's Political Participation in India: A Study

Mr.Santosh S.Ghorpade Lecturer, Department of Political Science K.L.E.Society's G. I.  
Bagewadi Arts, Science & Commerce College, Nipani.

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### Abstract

Women's political participation is a crucial indicator of gender equality and democratic inclusivity. In India, despite constitutional guarantees and various policy interventions, women remain underrepresented in political institutions at all levels. This paper aims to analyse the trends, challenges, and opportunities in women's political participation in India while proposing a comprehensive agenda for their empowerment.

The objective of this paper is three fold. First, it examines the historical and contemporary status of women in Indian politics, highlighting their representation in legislative bodies, local governance, and party structures. Second, it identifies key barriers- social, economic, and institutional that hinder women's active engagement in political processes. These include patriarchal norms, lack of financial resources, political violence, and limited access to leadership opportunities. Third, the paper outlines policy measures and strategic interventions necessary to enhance women's political empowerment. This includes legislative reforms such as increased reservation in Parliament and state assemblies, capacity-building initiatives, gender-sensitive political education, and the role of civil society in fostering an inclusive political environment.

Through a critical analysis of existing frameworks and best practices from other democracies, this study provides a roadmap for strengthening women's political participation in India. The findings contribute to the broader discourse on gender and governance, emphasizing the need for a multi-stakeholder approaches to bridge the gender gap in politics. The paper underscores that achieving gender parity in political representation is not just a matter of social justice but also essential for sustainable and inclusive development.

By addressing systemic barriers and proposing actionable strategies, this study seeks to foster a more gender-equitable political landscape in India, ensuring that women's voices are heard and valued in decision-making processes.

Keywords: Gender equality; Political Participation; Reservation; Women Empowerment; Decision Making Process.

### Introduction:

The position and status of women in any society determines the degree of civilization of the country. During the infancy of the society women were placed in a position of absolute dependence of men. With the passage of time progressive thinking of the social reformers brought in the much desired change in the lives of women. Women's empowerment as a phenomenon is not something new. It has been there for variety of reasons. What could be considered as new is it's increasingly coming out in public, it's having been shifted and reshaped from women's welfare to their development to now women's empowerment, and it's being discussed, reported and critically evaluated. Empowering women is absolutely essential, rather imperative, for familial, societal, national and international development and progress. Genuine commitment and efforts have to be made by each country at the government, non- government and individual levels to work, towards establishing women's empowerment as a nationally and internationally discussed also in U.N. World Conference on Women and agreed upon the plan for Action.

### **Empowerment: Meaning**

Empowerment has become a fashionable and buzz word. It essentially means decentralization of authority and power. It aims at getting participation of deprived sections of people in decision making process. In other words giving voice to voiceless. Empowerment may mean equal status to women, opportunity and freedom to develop herself. The focus of empowerment is equipping women to be economically independent, self reliant, have a positive self esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and they should be able to participate in the process of decision making. Women's Political Participation refers to their involvement in various aspects of politics, including voting in elections, contesting for political offices, holding positions in government and administration; being a part of political parties and movements, engaging in policy making and governance. Political participation of women in India has been a crucial aspect of Gender Equality and democratic governance. While India has seen several women in key leadership positions, overall participation remains limited due to social, economic and cultural barriers. The agenda of empowerment aims to bridge this gap by ensuring equal representation and active involvement of women in decision- making process.

### **Empowerment of Women**

Political empowerment of women is key of achieving gender equality, as it gives women the platform to address issues like Education, Health Care and Gender based violence. The world over women are struggling to break the shackles that bind them and challenging the unequal distribution of power in society. It is imperative for women to be in the corridors of power and have the power to negotiate a better deal for themselves, if they are to influence a better deal for themselves if they are to influence policy decisions which have an impact upon them. Empowerment of women in all spheres; in particular the political field is crucial for their advancement and the formation of a gender equal society.

Women's political participation is a premise on three fundamental principles-

1. The equality between women and men
2. Women's right to the full development of their potentials; and
3. Women right to self- representation and self determination.

The concern for women's political equality in India first emerged as a political issue during the National movement in which women were active participants. As early as 1917, Indian women raised the issue of representation in politics, which meant a demand for Universal Adult franchise. By 1929 women had the right to vote on the basis of wife hood, property and education. Under the Government of India Act 1935, all women over 21 could vote provided they fulfilled the conditions of property and education.

### **Objectives of the paper**

The objective of this paper is three fold.

First, it examines the historical and contemporary status of women in Indian politics, highlighting their representation in legislative bodies, local governance, and party structures.

Second, it identifies key barriers- social, economic, and institutional that hinder women's active engagement in political processes. These include patriarchal norms, lack of financial resources, political violence, and limited access to leadership opportunities.

Third, the paper outlines policy measures and strategic interventions necessary to enhance women's political empowerment.

**Methodology** This paper is prepared by using the secondary data taken from various sources including journals, departmental documents, ministerial reports, etc. Percentage and tabulation has been used.

#### Major Challenges to Women's Political Participation

Women in politics face significant challenges like,

- **Proxy Representation:** It is where women elected to office were largely “controlled” by the male family members. This is particularly prevalent in the Local Self-Governments and dubbed as ‘Sarpanch Pati’.
- **Finances:** Financing is also an obstacle, as many women are financially dependent on their families. Fighting elections can be costly and massive financial resources are required.
- **Political and Institutional Barriers:** Women are often denied important positions within political parties, with male-dominated networks controlling key decision-making processes.
- **Lack of family support:** Many women face opposition from their families and communities in pursuing political careers.
- **Societal issues:** The various reasons of low women representation in politics are patriarchal mindset with male domination of most fields, women being viewed as homemaker only, child bearing role is emphasised as the most important priority of women, absence of equal opportunities etc.
- **Lack of political will:** Political parties are reluctant to distribute tickets to female contestants as they are considered weak by the society thus reducing the chances of winning election.
- **Illiteracy:** In India, women have a literacy rate of 65% compared to men's 82%.
- **Violence and Safety Issues:** Women politicians often face harassment, threats, and violence, both online and offline. The fear of violence deters many women from actively participating in politics

#### Women in Politics Measures Taken

Several measures have been taken to promote women's participation in politics.

##### a. Constitutional Measures

- **Right to Vote:** Articles 325 and 326 of the Constitution of India guaranteed political equality and the right to vote for women by ensuring Universal Adult franchise and preventing exclusion from the voter's list based on sex.
- **Right to Contest:** Article 84 and 173 of the constitution ensure that any Indian citizen who is registered as a voter can contest elections to the Parliament or the state Legislative Assemblies
- **Reservation in Representation:** The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992) provided for reservation of one-third (33%) of the total number of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies.
- **106<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment:** Women's Reservation Act 2023 mandates 33% reservation for Women in the Lok Sabha, State Assemblies and Delhi Legislative Assembly. Passed in September 2023, it aims to enhance women's political representation but will be implemented after the next census and delimitation exercise.

- International Commitments: India is a signatory to the convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women [CEDAW] and aligns with the Beijing Declaration on Gender Equality promoting women's participation in public life.
- Capacity- Building Initiatives: The National Commission for Women [NCW] and Civil Society Organisations have launched training programs aimed at equipping women with leadership skills.
- Measures Taken by the Election Commission of India: Women friendly 'pink booths' are setup where the entire staff, including election officials, police and security personnel are female. Further, it has launched initiatives like Systematic Voter's Education and Electoral Participation [SVEEP]

Current Status of Women's Political Participation in India

Despite Legal Rights and Constitutional provisions, women's representation in Indian politics remains low compared to men. India the World's largest democracy has seen gradual but slow progress in increasing women's representation in politics.

Table 1. Women as Contestants in Lok Sabha

Year	Males	Females	Total	% of males winning	% of females winning
1952	1831	43	1874	26.05	51.16
1957	1473	45	1518	31.7	60.0
1962	1915	70	1985	24.0	50.0
1967	2302	67	2369	21.3	44.8
1971	2698	86	2784	18.5	24.4
1977	2369	70	2439	22.1	27.1
1980	4478	142	4620	11.5	19.7
1984	5406	164	5574	9.2	25.6
1989	5962	198	6160	8.5	13.6
1991	8374	325	8699	5.9	12.0
1996	13353	599	13952	3.8	6.7
1998	4476	274	4750	11.2	15.7
1999	3976	278	4254	12.3	17.3
2004	5080	355	5435	9.8	12.3
2009	2514	556	8070	6.44	10.61
2014	7583	668	8251	6.36	8.1
2019	7334	715	8049	6.39	10.35
2024	7553	799	8352	6.2	9.3

Source- PIB Ministry of Information and Broadcasting

- Number of Women Contesting- The number of Women contesting election has always been low as may be seen from above table. The highest number of women contestants has been merely 599 in 1996, and during the 18th Lok Sabha elections in 2024 it were 797.
- Women Elected to Legislative Bodies: Women have not found adequate representation in the Lok Sabha. The percentage of elected women Lok Sabha members has never exceeded.

Table 2 Representation of women in Lok Sabha since 1952.

Year	Seats	Women MPs	% of Women MPs
1952	499	22	4.41
1957	500	27	5.40
1962	503	34	6.76
1967	523	31	5.93

1971	521	22	4.22
1977	544	19	3.29
1980	544	28	5.15
1984	544	44	8.9
1989	517	27	5.22
1991	544	39	7.17
1996	543	39	7.18
1998	543	43	7.92
1999	543	49	9.02
2004	543	45	8.03
2009	543	59	10.86
2014	543	62	11.42
2019	543	78	14.37
2024	543	74	13.6

Source- PIB Ministry of Information and Broadcasting

- The representation of women in the Union Council of Ministers between 1985 and 2024 is shown in below table. The data shows that women have remained poorly represented in the Council of Ministers.

The representation of women in India's Union Council of Ministers from 1985 to 2024 has seen fluctuations across different Lok Sabha terms. Below is a tabular summary of the number of women ministers during each term:

Lok Sabha Term	Period	Number of Women Ministers
8 <sup>th</sup>	1984-1989	5
9 <sup>th</sup>	1989-1991	2
10 <sup>th</sup>	1991-1996	12
11 <sup>th</sup>	1996-1998	7
12 <sup>th</sup>	1998-1999	9
13 <sup>th</sup>	1999-2004	7
14 <sup>th</sup>	2004-2009	10
15 <sup>th</sup>	2009-2014	15
16 <sup>th</sup>	2014-2019	10
17 <sup>th</sup>	2019-2024	13
18 <sup>th</sup>	2024-Present	7

The highest representation was during the 15th Lok Sabha (2009–2014) with 15 women ministers, while the lowest in this period was during the 9th Lok Sabha (1989–1991) with only 2 women ministers. As of the 18th Lok Sabha (2024–Present), there are 7 women ministers in the Union Council, marking the lowest number since the 13th Lok Sabha (1999–2004).

- Global Comparison: India's Global ranking in terms of women's political representation remains low. As per IPU [Inter- Parliamentary Union] in 2023, India ranked 143rd among 185 countries in terms of women's representation in Parliament.

Women in Politics Way Forward:

The way forward for women in politics involves legally mandating political parties to allocate 1/3 of tickets to women, Empowering Women's Organisation providing training removing barriers and ensuring safe, inclusive environment.

- **Mandate on Political parties:** Every registered political party should be legally obliged to give one-third of the total number of party tickets it distributes at every election to women. The Representation of People Act 1950 will have to be amended to enable this strategy.
- **Role of Women Organisations:** Women’s organisations and networks within political parties and civil society must continue to help women assert their presence within the larger political and social landscape.
- **Capacity Building:** Continuous training programs and mentorship for women in politics can build confidence and equip them with the necessary skills for governance.
- **Removal of Barriers:** Better educational opportunities for women , improved financial stability, and the relative erosion of social prejudices can enhance their political participation.
- **Promoting Gender Sensitization:** Political parties and civil society must advocate for gender sensitisation programs to break societal stereotypes and encourage equal participation of women in governance.
- **Technological and Financial Support:** Providing women with access to digital tools for campaigning and communication, along with financial assistance or subsidies for electoral campaigns, can help overcome structural barriers.

**Conclusion:** Women’s political participation in India has made significant progress over the years, yet challenges remain in achieving true gender equality in governance. While constitutional provisions, legal reforms, and grassroots initiatives like Panchayati Raj reservations have enhanced women’s representation, structural barriers such as patriarchal norms, lack of education, economic dependence, and political violence continue to hinder their full participation. True empowerment will be achieved when women not only participate in politics but also influence policies and governance structures in ways that reflect their perspectives and needs. A sustained commitment from the government, civil society, and political parties is necessary to create an equitable and inclusive democracy in India.

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