



Women's Political Participation in India: Challenges, Achievements, and Future Prospects

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Abstract

Women's political participation is a crucial indicator of the health and quality of a democracy. In India, women's involvement in politics has increased gradually since independence, yet their overall representation in legislatures and decision-making institutions remains limited. Although women have exercised their voting rights actively and have made remarkable contributions as political leaders, structural, social, economic, and cultural barriers continue to restrict their effective participation. This paper examines the historical evolution of women's political participation in India, analyzes the major challenges they face, highlights key achievements, and explores future prospects for enhancing women's representation and empowerment in the political sphere.

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Introduction

Political participation is a fundamental pillar of democratic governance. A truly inclusive democracy requires the equal participation of both men and women in political processes and decision-making. Women constitute nearly half of India's population; therefore, their fair representation in political institutions is not only a matter of justice but also essential for balanced policy-making and sustainable development.

India granted women the right to vote at the time of independence, unlike many Western countries that struggled for decades to achieve women's suffrage. Despite this progressive constitutional provision, the actual participation of women in electoral politics as candidates, legislators, and political leaders has remained relatively low. While women's voter turnout has improved significantly over the years and in some elections has even surpassed that of men, their presence in Parliament and State Assemblies has grown slowly.

The issue of women's political participation goes beyond mere numerical representation. It involves women's ability to influence political agendas, shape public policies, and actively engage in governance. This paper aims to explore the status, challenges, and future possibilities of women's political participation in India.

Historical Evolution of Women's Political Participation in India

Women in India have played a significant role in political movements even before independence. During the Indian freedom struggle, leaders such as Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Kasturba Gandhi, and Aruna Asaf Ali mobilized women to participate in national movements, protests, and civil disobedience campaigns. Their participation laid the foundation for women's involvement in formal politics.

After independence, the Constitution of India guaranteed equality before the law (Article 14), prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex (Article 15), and ensured equal opportunities in public employment (Article 16). Women like Indira Gandhi, who became India's first woman Prime Minister, demonstrated that women could successfully occupy the highest political office in the country.

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in the 1990s were landmark reforms that provided for 33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies. This significantly increased women's participation at the grassroots level and created a large base of women leaders in local governance.

Present Status of Women's Political Participation

Despite constitutional guarantees and legal provisions, women's representation in higher political institutions remains limited.

Table 1: Women's Representation in Lok Sabha (Approximate Data)

Year	Total Seats	Women Elected	Percentage
1952	489	22	4.5%
1999	543	49	9.0%
2009	543	59	10.9%
2014	543	62	11.4%
2019	543	78	14.4%

While the trend shows gradual improvement, the percentage remains far below the global average in many democracies. Women's voter participation has seen remarkable improvement. In recent general elections, women's voter turnout has been at par with or even higher than men in several states, showing growing political awareness and engagement among women.

Forms of Political Participation by Women (Without Subpoints)

Women's political participation in India is not limited only to voting or contesting elections; rather, it is a continuous and multi-layered process that operates at formal and informal levels. One of the most visible forms of participation is women's active involvement as voters in local, state, and national elections. Over the decades, women's voter turnout has steadily increased, reflecting a growing awareness of political rights and responsibilities. In several recent elections, women's turnout has equaled or even surpassed that of men, showing that women are no longer passive observers but influential participants in democratic processes.

Beyond voting, women engage in political participation through their association with political parties. They work as grassroots mobilizers, booth-level workers, campaign volunteers, and ideological supporters. Through these roles, women help connect political parties with communities, especially in rural and marginalized areas. Their participation in election campaigns, public meetings, rallies, and door-to-door canvassing strengthens democratic practices and enhances political communication between citizens and institutions. However, their work often remains undervalued, and they are rarely promoted to decision-making positions within party hierarchies.

Women also participate in governance through local self-government institutions such as Panchayati Raj bodies and urban local governments. The reservation policies for women have enabled millions of women to enter the political arena at the grassroots level. As elected representatives in village councils and municipalities, women have been actively involved in decision-making related to education, health, sanitation, water supply, and welfare schemes. This form of participation has brought governance closer to women's lived experiences and has encouraged more gender-sensitive policy implementation. Importantly, grassroots political engagement has helped women develop leadership skills, administrative experience, and political confidence.

Another significant form of women's political participation is their involvement in civil society organizations, social movements, and advocacy groups. Many women engage in campaigns related to gender justice, environmental protection, labor rights, and social welfare. Through public protests,

petitions, community meetings, and awareness drives, women influence public opinion and political decisions, even when they are not directly part of formal political institutions. This form of participation reflects the broader democratic engagement of women in shaping political discourse and policy outcomes.

In the contemporary era, women are increasingly using digital platforms and social media as tools for political expression and mobilization. They participate in online discussions, raise awareness about social and political issues, and organize campaigns using digital technology. This has expanded the scope of political participation beyond physical boundaries, enabling educated and young women to voice their opinions more freely. Overall, women's political participation in India represents a complex combination of electoral involvement, institutional engagement, community leadership, and issue-based activism, all of which contribute significantly to the functioning and deepening of democracy.

Challenges to Women's Political Participation (Without Subpoints)

Despite constitutional guarantees and democratic ideals, women in India continue to face numerous obstacles that limit their effective participation in politics. One of the most deeply rooted challenges is the persistence of patriarchal social norms, which construct politics as a male-dominated sphere and restrict women primarily to domestic roles. Societal expectations often discourage women from stepping into leadership positions, questioning their capability and legitimacy as political actors. This deeply ingrained mindset not only affects family and community support for women but also influences the decisions of political parties when selecting candidates.

Another major obstacle is the lack of adequate financial resources. Electoral politics in India is highly expensive, requiring substantial funds for campaigning, transportation, publicity, and organizational support. Most women do not have independent access to financial capital or property and are economically dependent on male family members, which severely limits their capacity to contest elections. Even when women have leadership potential, the absence of financial backing often forces them to withdraw from political competition or accept subordinate roles.

Political violence, intimidation, and harassment also pose serious barriers. Women in politics frequently encounter character assassination, gender-based attacks, online trolling, threats of physical violence, and humiliation in public spaces. Such hostile environments create fear and mental pressure, discouraging many capable women from active political engagement. The rise of digital media has further intensified these problems, as women politicians are often targeted by abusive online campaigns aimed at silencing their voices and undermining their confidence.

Institutional barriers within political parties further restrict women's participation. Internal party structures are largely male-dominated, and women are rarely included in core decision-making committees. Political parties often perceive women candidates as less "electable" and are reluctant to give them tickets, especially in constituencies considered politically important or financially lucrative. As a result, women remain underrepresented not because of lack of interest or capability, but due to systemic discrimination within party organizations themselves.

Educational and informational gaps also contribute to low political participation among women, particularly in rural and

marginalized communities. Limited access to higher education, lack of political training, and low awareness of legal rights weaken women's confidence and preparedness to enter politics. In many cases, women elected in local bodies are controlled by male relatives, a phenomenon popularly referred to as "proxy representation," which undermines the spirit of genuine women's empowerment.

Overall, the challenges to women's political participation in India are multidimensional, involving social attitudes,

economic inequality, institutional bias, gender-based violence, and educational limitations. These interconnected barriers create a complex environment that hinders women from realizing their full political potential. Unless these structural and cultural obstacles are systematically addressed through legal reforms, social change, and institutional support, the goal of achieving genuine gender equality in political participation will remain incomplete.

Government Initiatives and Legal Measures

Table 2: Major Policy Measures for Women's Political Empowerment

Initiative/Law	Year	Key Provision
Constitutional Equality Provisions	1950	Equal political rights to women
73rd & 74th Amendments	1992	33% reservation in local bodies
Women's Reservation Bill (Proposed/Passed as Constitutional Amendment)	2023	33% reservation in Lok Sabha & State Assemblies (phased implementation)

These measures reflect the state's commitment to improving women's representation in governance.

Achievements and Success Stories

Women leaders in India have made significant contributions at national and regional levels. Besides Prime Ministers and Chief Ministers, many women have taken leadership roles in panchayats and municipalities, bringing changes in areas such as education, sanitation, healthcare, and social welfare.

Studies show that women-led local governments often prioritize human development issues more effectively, indicating the positive impact of women's leadership on governance.

Conclusion

Women's political participation is vital for the deepening and strengthening of Indian democracy. Although India has made notable progress, especially at the grassroots level, women remain underrepresented in higher political institutions. Addressing social, economic, and political barriers is essential to achieve genuine gender equality in political life. A more inclusive political system that actively encourages women's leadership will not only empower women but also improve the overall quality of governance and democratic accountability in India.

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