WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND LEADERSHIP IN INDIA: CHALLENGES AND PROGRESS

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ABSTRACT:

Women's political representation and leadership in India have undergone a complex journey marked by both progress and persistent inequality. From the early participation of women in the freedom struggle to the implementation of reservation policies in local governance, the trajectory reflects a gradual expansion of democratic inclusion. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, women continue to face social, structural, and institutional barriers that restrict their full participation in political life. Patriarchal norms, limited access to financial and educational resources, and male-dominated party structures remain key obstacles. However, recent decades have witnessed significant changes. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments opened the doors of local governance to millions of women, transforming the political landscape at the grassroots. The passage of the Women's Reservation Bill in 2023, though awaiting implementation, promises to extend this inclusion to state and national legislatures. Alongside formal reforms, women's rising voter turnout, digital engagement, and leadership in governance highlight a shift in both perception and participation.

While challenges remain in achieving parity, the ongoing evolution of women's leadership suggests a movement from token representation toward substantive empowerment. Women leaders are increasingly shaping policy priorities, emphasizing social welfare, education, and gender justice. The future of Indian democracy depends on deepening this transformation—ensuring that women not only occupy political spaces but also redefine them through inclusive, accountable, and gender-sensitive governance.

Keywords: Women's representation, Political leadership, Gender equality, Reservation policy, India, Governance.

INTRODUCTION

Women's political representation in India is both a measure of democratic maturity and a reflection of social progress. Since independence, the country has committed itself to gender equality through constitutional rights and electoral participation. Yet, women's presence in decision-making institutions remains disproportionately low compared to their population share. Politics in India has traditionally been dominated by men, shaped by patriarchal structures that limit women's access to power, resources, and public visibility. The participation of women in the freedom struggle laid an early foundation for political inclusion, but this momentum did not immediately translate into equal representation in independent India. For decades, women's leadership was confined to a few exceptional figures rather than a systemic reality. The introduction of reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions in the 1990s marked a turning point, bringing millions of women into governance and redefining leadership at the grassroots. Today, women play an increasingly active role as voters, candidates, and policymakers, but their journey toward equal representation remains unfinished. Understanding the challenges and progress of women's political participation in India is crucial to assessing the health of its democracy. It reveals not only the obstacles to equality but also the transformative potential of inclusive governance.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

This study explores the Challenges and Progress of Women's Political Representation and Leadership in India.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study purely based on secondary data sources such as articles, research papers, journals, books, websites and other sources.

1. Historical Evolution of Women's Political Representation in India

Women's involvement in Indian politics has evolved through a long and layered history shaped by colonial experiences, social reform movements, and constitutional guarantees after independence. The early seeds of women's political participation were sown during the freedom struggle, when women leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and Aruna Asaf Ali took center stage in mobilizing masses. These leaders did not merely participate in protests; they organized movements, negotiated political agendas, and built networks that questioned both colonial authority and patriarchal norms. Their activism helped position women's political inclusion as an essential part of India's democratic promise.

After independence, the Indian Constitution granted women equal political rights—universal adult suffrage, the right to contest elections, and protection from gender-based discrimination. India was among the first post-colonial nations to adopt universal franchise, a progressive move for a country with deep-rooted patriarchy. Yet, this legal equality did not translate into proportional representation. The first Lok Sabha in 1952 had only 22

women MPs out of 499 members, roughly 4.4%. This imbalance has persisted, with women's representation hovering in the single digits for decades. Despite a few landmark moments—such as Indira Gandhi becoming Prime Minister in 1966—political power has largely remained male-dominated.

The historical pattern shows that symbolic achievements have not always led to systemic change. Indira Gandhi's leadership, for instance, demonstrated that women could command authority at the highest level, but her rise did not open institutional pathways for other women. Political participation remained restricted to women from elite, educated, or dynastic backgrounds. For many years, the absence of affirmative policies, combined with social conservatism, limited the number of women entering politics at both national and state levels.

A major turning point came with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992, which introduced reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and urban local bodies. This policy guaranteed that at least one-third of all seats in local governance would be occupied by women. This was a transformative step: millions of women began participating in decision-making for the first time. Studies show that this policy not only increased representation but also influenced governance outcomes—issues like sanitation, health, and education received greater attention. Over time, many states extended the reservation to 50%, reinforcing grassroots leadership among women.

The historical journey of women's political representation in India reflects both progress and continuity. From the freedom struggle to local governance reforms, women have fought for visibility and legitimacy in a space that has often been exclusionary. The progress at the grassroots has not yet been matched at higher levels of political office, where structural barriers remain strong. Yet, the steady rise of women leaders at local levels and the growing public discourse on gender equity mark an irreversible shift in India's democratic landscape. History shows that while women's political representation began as a moral demand, it has evolved into a structural necessity for inclusive governance.

2. Structural Barriers to Women's Political Participation

Women's underrepresentation in Indian politics is not just a reflection of electoral outcomes but of deep-rooted structural barriers embedded in social, economic, and institutional systems. These barriers operate at multiple levels—family, community, political parties, and state institutions—restricting both entry and advancement for women in political spaces.

Social norms remain one of the most persistent obstacles. Patriarchal attitudes in many parts of India still define politics as a "male domain," while women are expected to prioritize domestic roles. Families often discourage women from entering politics due to safety concerns, fear of public scrutiny, and the perception that politics is corrupt or morally compromising. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle: because few women participate, politics continues to appear male-centric, further discouraging others from joining. Economic dependence is another

structural barrier. Political participation requires financial resources—for campaigning, travel, networking, and maintaining constituency offices. Since women in India, on average, have lower income levels and asset ownership than men, they face greater constraints in funding their political careers. Even within parties, women often find it difficult to secure funding for their campaigns, limiting their competitiveness in elections.

Institutionally, political parties function as gatekeepers to power. In most parties, candidate selection is controlled by male-dominated committees or leadership circles that tend to favor men. Women are often relegated to "safe" or symbolic positions rather than winnable seats. Party hierarchies also marginalize women in decision-making bodies, meaning that even within parties, women's voices are often tokenistic rather than influential. This systemic exclusion is one of the most significant factors behind the limited number of women in national and state legislatures.

Cultural and logistical barriers compound these issues. Women candidates often face gender-based violence, harassment, and intimidation during elections. Many women leaders at the local level encounter resistance from male counterparts or even from bureaucratic institutions that undermine their authority. Although legal protections exist, enforcement is weak. Additionally, the lack of supportive infrastructure—such as childcare facilities, safe transport, or flexible schedules—makes it difficult for women to balance public duties with personal responsibilities. The intersectionality of caste, class, and religion further deepens these structural barriers. Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim women face compounded discrimination, both within their communities and in political institutions. While reservations at the local level have helped increase their visibility, these women often face pressure to conform to male-driven agendas or proxy control, where husbands or male relatives effectively run the office on their behalf.

Despite these structural barriers, some progress has been made through legislative and policy reforms. The introduction of political training programs for elected women representatives, capacity-building workshops, and mentorship initiatives have started to address knowledge and confidence gaps. However, these measures are piecemeal and often lack continuity. Without systemic change in party structures, campaign financing, and social attitudes, women's political participation will remain constrained.

3. The Role of Political Parties in Advancing Women's Leadership

Political parties are the central engines of democratic participation in India. They decide who gets nominated, who receives funding, and who rises through the ranks. Thus, their stance on women's inclusion significantly shapes the overall landscape of gender representation. While most parties publicly endorse gender equality, their internal practices often fall short of these commitments. Historically, women's wings within major political parties have been used as auxiliary bodies rather than centers of decision-making. The Congress Party's Mahila Congress, the BJP's Mahila Morcha, and similar women's units in regional parties often focus on mobilizing female voters, organizing campaigns, or managing social outreach, but rarely influence core policy or candidate

selection. This division of labor reinforces a gender hierarchy where men make strategic decisions while women execute secondary tasks. The nomination process reflects this imbalance starkly. Election data shows that political parties consistently field a low proportion of women candidates—typically between 8 to 12 percent of total candidates in Lok Sabha elections. Even when women are nominated, they are often assigned to constituencies where the party has little chance of winning. Male incumbents are protected, while women are used to project an image of inclusivity. This tokenism reveals that gender equality is more a matter of optics than genuine power-sharing.

However, there are variations among parties. The Trinamool Congress, Biju Janata Dal, and some Left parties have taken more proactive measures to promote women's participation. For instance, Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress allocated 41% of its tickets to women in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, a significant benchmark in Indian politics. Similarly, the BJD in Odisha, under Naveen Patnaik, has consciously promoted women leaders both at the local and state levels. These cases demonstrate that political will can alter the status quo. Despite these exceptions, the broader party system remains resistant to gender parity. Internal party democracy is weak across most Indian parties, and leadership succession is often hereditary. Women from political families—such as Sonia Gandhi, Supriya Sule, or Kanimozhi—have an easier path to power, highlighting how dynastic privilege intersects with gender. This has created an elite layer of women leaders who are visible nationally but do not necessarily represent the broader struggles of ordinary women in politics.

The long-pending Women's Reservation Bill has exposed the ambivalence of political parties. Although most parties express rhetorical support for reserving one-third of seats in Parliament and state legislatures for women, few have pushed it consistently through legislative channels. The bill was finally passed in 2023 after decades of delay, but its implementation awaits delimitation, meaning its actual effect may still be years away. This delay reflects the reluctance of male political elites to share legislative space. Some emerging trends, however, are encouraging. Parties are gradually recognizing the electoral significance of women voters, who now turn out in higher numbers than men in several states. As women become a decisive electoral bloc, parties are adopting "women-first" manifestos, launching welfare schemes targeting women, and highlighting female leaders in campaigns. While these shifts may be motivated by electoral strategy rather than feminist ideals, they nonetheless create space for greater gender visibility in politics.

4. Impact of Reservation Policies on Women's Political Empowerment

Reservation policies have been the most significant instrument for increasing women's participation in India's political system, especially at the local level. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992 were watershed moments, introducing a mandatory 33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj and urban local bodies. These amendments did more than guarantee representation—they democratized leadership at the grassroots and created an entirely new generation of women politicians. The policy led to over one million women entering local governance across India. This mass inclusion disrupted traditional gender roles in rural

areas where women had little prior exposure to public office. Research from states like Kerala, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh shows that women representatives began prioritizing issues such as clean water, healthcare, education, and domestic violence—areas often overlooked by male counterparts. The reservation policy thus had both quantitative and qualitative impacts, broadening the policy agenda to reflect women's lived experiences.

One of the early criticisms of the reservation system was the phenomenon of "proxy politics," where male relatives often referred to as "sarpanch pati" would control decision-making on behalf of elected women. While this practice did exist, longitudinal studies suggest that over time, many women became more assertive and independent. Continuous exposure to governance processes, training programs, and peer networks allowed women to develop political confidence and administrative skills. Over the years, the presence of women in local councils has normalized female authority in many rural communities. States that expanded reservations to 50% have shown stronger outcomes in terms of women's visibility and confidence. Bihar, Odisha, and Rajasthan are prominent examples where extended quotas have encouraged more women to contest general (non-reserved) seats as well. The ripple effect of these policies is visible in the increasing number of women participating in state and national politics, even if their overall share remains limited.

The recent passage of the Women's Reservation Bill in Parliament in 2023 marks another milestone. The bill mandates 33% reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies. While its actual implementation awaits delimitation, it represents a long-overdue recognition that voluntary inclusion by parties has failed. If executed effectively, this reform could reshape political competition and bring gender equity to higher echelons of governance. However, reservations alone cannot guarantee empowerment. Without complementary measures such as capacity building, access to resources, and protection from political violence, the benefits of quotas may remain symbolic. Moreover, representation must reflect diversity within women's groups—Dalit, tribal, and minority women must not be marginalized within gender-based quotas. Ensuring intersectional inclusion will determine whether reservation policies lead to real transformation or merely numeric representation.

Another dimension of the reservation debate concerns the perception of merit. Critics argue that quotas undermine meritocracy, but this argument ignores the structural biases that have historically excluded women from politics. Reservation policies are corrective measures designed to level the field, not privileges granted at the expense of merit. Evidence from two decades of local governance reforms shows that women leaders often perform as well as, or better than, their male counterparts when given equal opportunities.

5. Emerging Trends and the Future of Women's Political Leadership in India

Women's political representation in India is entering a new phase marked by shifting social attitudes, digital empowerment, and changing electoral dynamics. While challenges persist, the trajectory points toward gradual but irreversible progress. The next decade is likely to see a more diverse and assertive generation of women leaders who redefine political priorities and leadership styles. One of the most visible trends is the growing

political awareness among young women. Education, urbanization, and digital access have expanded their engagement with civic issues. Social media platforms provide spaces for women to express opinions, mobilize support, and build independent political identities outside traditional party structures. Online activism around gender issues—such as campaigns against sexual harassment, unequal pay, and gender violence—has begun to influence mainstream politics, pressuring parties to address these concerns.

Grassroots experiences are also shaping new leadership pathways. Women who started as panchayat leaders are moving up the political ladder, challenging the idea that reservations create "temporary" leaders. Many of them now contest assembly and parliamentary elections, bringing governance experience from the ground level. This bottom-up mobility represents one of the most promising shifts in Indian politics, as it diversifies the background and perspective of women entering higher offices. Media representation is another evolving dimension. The portrayal of women politicians is slowly moving beyond stereotypes. While sexism in coverage persists, there is a growing recognition of women leaders as capable administrators and change-makers. The visibility of leaders like Mamata Banerjee, Nirmala Sitharaman, Smriti Irani, and K. Kavitha illustrates that women now hold portfolios that were once considered "male" domains—finance, defense, and home affairs—signifying a shift in gender perceptions.

Institutional reforms and global influences also play a role. India's participation in international forums on gender equality, such as the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, reinforces the domestic agenda of women's empowerment. The corporate sector and civil society have started investing in political mentorship programs for women, bridging gaps in leadership training and policy expertise. However, emerging trends also reveal new challenges. The rise of populist politics and the commercialization of elections increase the cost of political participation, which disproportionately affects women. Online harassment and digital abuse target female politicians more intensely, creating psychological and reputational barriers. To sustain progress, both the state and civil society must create safer and more equitable political spaces—through stronger laws against harassment, equitable media guidelines, and transparent funding mechanisms. The long-term future of women's political leadership in India depends on structural change at multiple levels. Educational institutions must encourage political literacy among young women; political parties must institutionalize internal quotas and mentorship; and governance systems must reward inclusive leadership styles. As more women enter public life, leadership itself will likely evolve to become more collaborative, issue-driven, and empathetic—a contrast to the adversarial and personality-driven politics that currently dominate.

CONCLUSION

Women's political representation and leadership in India have advanced through a mix of constitutional reforms, social movements, and persistent advocacy, yet the path toward equality remains incomplete. While legal provisions such as the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments and the 2023 Women's Reservation Bill have

expanded opportunities for participation, structural and cultural barriers continue to limit women's influence at higher levels of governance. The evolution of women's roles—from grassroots leaders in panchayats to national policymakers—shows a gradual but steady shift toward inclusivity. However, representation must go beyond numbers to ensure genuine empowerment, autonomy, and policy impact. Strengthening internal democracy within political parties, providing financial and institutional support for women candidates, and addressing gender-based violence in politics are crucial next steps. India's democratic integrity depends on enabling women not merely to participate but to lead, shaping policies that reflect diverse voices and priorities. True political equality will be realized only when women's leadership becomes integral to governance rather than an exception within it.

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