



Representation of Women in Politics and Leadership in India

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Abstract

This paper examines the state of women's political representation and leadership in India: historical trends, institutional drivers (notably quotas and the Women's Reservation Bill), socio-cultural barriers, the effects of female office-holders on policy and social outcomes, and forward-looking policy recommendations. India's experience is notable for having large, legally mandated reservations for women at the local government level since the 1990s and for continuing debate over national parliamentary reservations. Empirical evidence from randomized and quasi-experimental studies in India shows that women leaders change local spending priorities, increase public goods valued by women, and act as role models that raise girls' aspirations. Yet, despite these gains at the local level, women remain under-represented in state legislatures and Parliament; party gatekeeping, campaign finance gaps, political violence and harassment, and cultural norms limit women's candidacies and electoral success. The Women's Reservation Bill (128th Constitutional Amendment) represents a major institutional reform under discussion; its passage and implementation raise design and timing challenges. Policy options that combine improved quota design and enforcement, candidate pipelines, protections against political violence, and norms-shifting programs are most likely to produce sustained improvements in women's substantive political representation in India. The paper synthesizes literature from Google Scholar, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), PRS India, World Bank, and key empirical studies and provides a bibliography with links to sources used.

Keywords: women's political representation, India, quotas, reservation, local government, political violence, role models.

Introduction

The representation of women in political decision-making is both a normative goal (gender equality) and an instrumental one (improving policy responsiveness to women's needs). India provides a striking laboratory for studying these questions. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts (early 1990s) mandated reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (rural and urban local bodies), leading to a large-scale, legally enforced increase in women's local political representation. Despite that, women's representation in state assemblies and the national Parliament has remained low relative to global averages, and the national Women's Reservation Bill — proposing one-third reservation in Parliament and state assemblies — has been debated for decades with renewed momentum in recent years.

The objective of this paper is to find out:

- (1) what has been achieved in India in terms of women's political representation and leadership;
- (2) what factors enable or impede female political advancement;
- (3) what impacts do women leaders have on policy and social outcomes; and
- (4) what policy measures are most promising going forward.

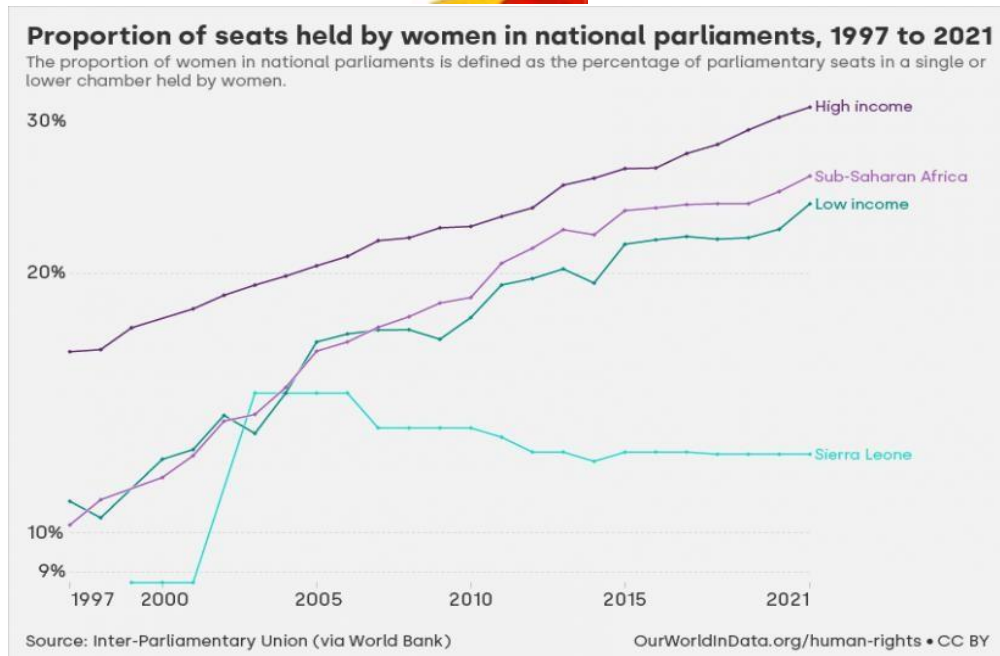
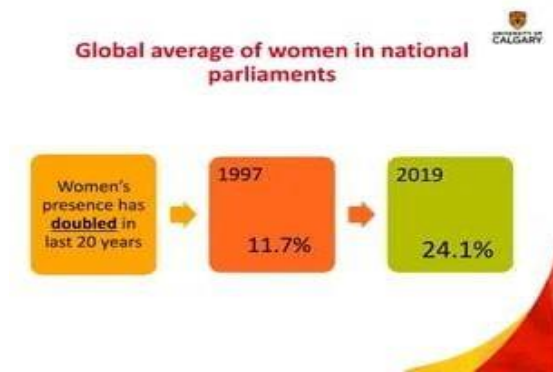
(Important data used in this paper come from IPU and national data compilations for comparative statistics and from field experiments and case studies for causal evidence.)

Literature review

2.1 Historical context along with big-picture shifts across India

India made it official back in 1992 - thanks to the 73rd and 74th changes to the Constitution - that one out of every three spots in village councils and city governments must go to women, with positions shifting between elections so more can take part. Because of this rule, countless women ended up winning local offices, boosting their presence in community-level decision-making like never before. Still, when you look higher - at state assemblies or national Parliament - the numbers don't climb much; data from PRS along with countrywide records reveal females hold only about fifteen percent of seats in both the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha lately.

Globally, women's presence in national parliaments jumped from about 11% in 1995 to nearly 27% by 2025 - but India hasn't kept up nationwide. According to the IPU's two-decade analysis, India lags behind both world benchmarks and numerous regional peers when it comes to representation in its central legislature.



Notes: Overall global trend indicates an increasing participation of women in national parliaments, but lower income countries lag significantly behind.
Source: Our World in Data, 2023.

2.2 Theoretical perspectives

Studies break down differences between nations and regions into three main groups:

Institutional reasons - like how elections are set up, party regulations, or official support such as quotas - influence how easy it's for women to get into politics. How these systems are built affects who's allowed to stand on one hand, also shapes which candidates parties actually choose on the other.

Social habits - like old-school attitudes, split roles based on gender, or common views on who should lead - can block women from aiming at politics or getting votes. These unwritten rules shape if voters think a woman can actually win. Studies find that seeing more women in charge tends to lessen unfair judgments, slowly boosting how many women take part in politics.

Supply meets need - candidates who're trained, funded, ready on one side; party choices and what voters want on the other - both shape results. When parties control access tightly or funding falls short, that's where demand hits a wall.

2.3 Proof about set-asides or saved spots

India's system of quotas plays a big part in worldwide research - thanks to random selection for village council chiefs and differences across villages, researchers got solid data on cause- and-effect links. A key paper by Chattopadhyay & Duflo (2004) leaned on this lottery-like setup to reveal how women officeholders shift budget choices, putting more weight on things like clean water that matter more to women; besides that, having female leaders helped reshape views about women in charge, hinting at an inspiration factor. When it comes to proving real- world impact from women joining politics locally - from better services to rising ambitions - the findings out of India, both experimental and near-experimental, rank among the most convincing anywhere.

Still, how it's built makes a difference - like turn-taking setups, if sign-ups are required or just suggested, along with the way groups rank female candidates (in vote-share systems), since these decide if quotas lead to real change or just window dressing. Studies across cases point to ranking rules and follow-through as crucial pieces that make or break quota results.

2.4 Results when women lead in politics across India Research shows various outcomes:

Folks who study policies notice that places run by women often spend more on clean water and toilets - like seen in parts of India. Instead of the usual focus, these leaders tend to back services that help homes run smoother. That shift lines up with valuing everyday needs over broad projects, lightening chores people do without pay.

Seeing women in charge can boost young girls' goals - sometimes even their education. This kind of inspiration shapes future leadership dreams and builds real skills over time.

Women in power can boost local leadership - some research shows that. But results depend on bigger systems, like how strong government is, political setups, or community habits shaping what changes happen.

2.5 Obstacles:

unrest tied to power struggles, threats or intimidation, how groups operate behind the scenes, alongside uneven access to support and tools

Latest findings reveal real roadblocks - various sources highlight tough challenges that keep cropping up

Female politicians often deal with threats, sexist remarks, or attacks online - these problems tend to scare some away from stepping into leadership roles. Across regions like Asia-Pacific, local findings along with international watchdog groups point out how common it is for women in politics to face targeted mistreatment while running for office or serving in government bodies.

Some parties don't back female candidates much - they pick them less for strong spots, give smaller budgets, or put them where winning's unlikely. Money shortages on the campaign side, along with thinner ties inside party circles, make it tougher for them to stay in the race.

Putting quotas into action isn't easy - timing map changes right, sharing seats fairly, mixing tribal and caste rules brings up real headaches; arguments about how the law should look often slow things down. New steps for the Women's Reservation Bill prove there's backing in politics, yet actual rollout still hits snags.

Research methodology

This paper is a systematic literature synthesis. Sources were retrieved using Google Scholar searches for peer-reviewed empirical studies and supplemented with institutional datasets and reports (IPU, World Bank, PRS India, MOSPI). Selection prioritized: (a) empirical identification strategies where possible; (b) recent reviews and meta-analyses; and (c) authoritative institutional statistics and policy documents. Where appropriate, individual studies (e.g., Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004) were used to illustrate mechanisms and causal claims.

Data analysis / Synthesis of findings

4.1 Descriptive statistics and trends

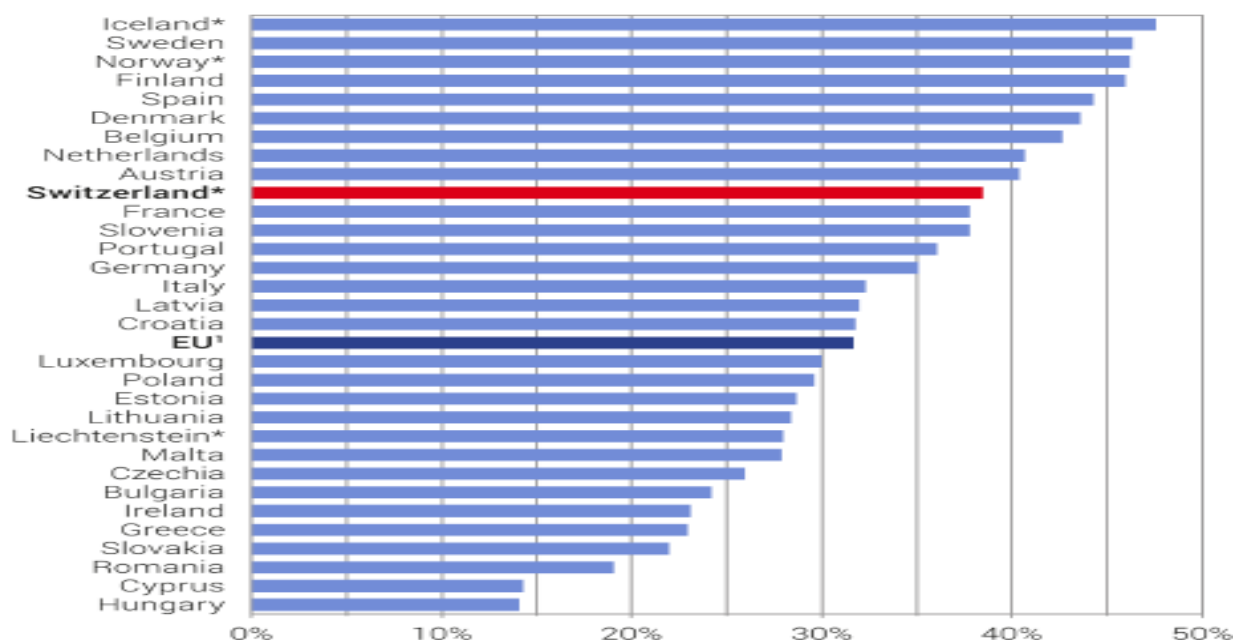
At the local level, India's reservations transformed the gender balance in rural councils: millions of women were elected to panchayats following the 1992 constitutional amendments, creating a large pool of female political officeholders.

At the national level, women's representation in India's Parliament has remained relatively low. PRS India reports (recent years) that women comprised around 15% of Lok Sabha MPs and roughly similar shares in Rajya Sabha at times of reporting; national indicators (World Bank) align with these figures and place India below the global average for national legislatures.

Internationally, the IPU reported that the global average share of women in national parliaments rose from ~11% in 1995 to ~27% in 2025; India lags this trend at the national level despite strong local representation gains.

Representation of women in national parliaments, 2023

Gender equality in european comparison
EU and EFTA Member States



¹ The figure for the EU corresponds to the average of the percentages of all member countries.

* EFTA member states are not included in the EU-average.

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), as at 23.10.2023

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4.2 Causal evidence from India's reservation experiments

The Chattopadhyay & Duflo randomized reservation study is foundational: random assignment of reserved seats for women in village council headships led to changed public spending priorities (e.g., water investment) and shifts in perceptions about women's effectiveness in leadership. Subsequent replications and related studies confirm role-model effects: girls exposed to female leaders increase aspirations and are more likely to enter politics later. This causal chain — reservations → women in office → different policy choices and aspirations → potential long-run social change — is strongly supported by Indian evidence.

4.3 Party politics and nomination dynamics

Research and policy analysis indicate parties matter. Parties decide nominations and tend to place women in less winnable seats or not invest in their campaigns. The supply of viable female candidates is influenced by party pipelines, internal party democracy, and party leadership attitudes. Comparative studies emphasize that quotas alone are insufficient without concomitant changes in party nomination behavior and campaign financing.

4.4 Political violence, harassment and online abuse

Recent investigations — including region-wide studies and press reporting — document pervasive gendered harassment against female politicians, with psychological violence, online hate, and in some cases sexual violence experienced by many women serving in legislatures. Such environments deter entry and retention and affect the substantive participation of women leaders. Addressing safety and environment in political institutions is therefore crucial.

4.5 Effects on governance and development indicators

Cross-study syntheses and World Bank/ORF policy analyses find links between higher female representation and improvements in social sector spending and some governance outcomes, though causal magnitudes vary and are mediated by institutional contexts. At local levels in India, evidence is most robust; at national levels, observational correlations exist but establishing causal relationships is methodologically more complex and requires careful identification strategies.

Discussion

5.1 Interpreting India's mixed results

India's experience demonstrates that legally mandated reservations can produce rapid and significant descriptive representation at the local level and produce meaningful policy differences and role-model effects. Yet translations into state and national representation have been slow because structural obstacles (party gatekeeping, resource imbalances), cultural norms, electoral system dynamics, and concerns about design and implementation at the national level impede progress. The national Women's Reservation Bill's prospects illustrate both political appetite for reform and the practical complexities that slow implementation (delimitation, census timing, interactions with caste/tribe reservations).

5.2 Policy implications for India

Based on the literature, the following policy recommendations appear most promising:

Pass and implement well-designed national reservation: If pursued, the Women's Reservation Bill should include clear design features — placement rules, timetable connected to delimitation that minimizes delay, and safeguards to ensure that reservations translate into winnable candidacies rather than token nominations. Policymakers should plan for synchronized implementation across central and state levels to avoid fragmentation.

Strengthen party pipelines and candidate training: Invest in long-term candidate development programs (training, mentoring, campaign finance support) for women; encourage party reforms to promote women's internal representation and leadership positions. Such supply-side measures increase the pool of competitive female candidates.

Address political violence and harassment: Establish and enforce codes of conduct in legislatures, create confidential reporting and support mechanisms, and work with social media companies and law enforcement to reduce online abuse. Investment in protection and safety reduces attrition and improves substantive participation.

Monitor and enforce quotas: Where quotas are used (nationally or within parties), implement placement mandates and penalties for non-compliance, monitored by independent electoral or civil society bodies. Enforcement prevents circumvention via tokenism.

Promote norms-shifting interventions: Civic education campaigns, visibility of women leaders, and role model interventions (school and community programs) can shift norms and expectations about female leadership over time. Experimental evidence suggests these symbolic effects matter.

5.3 Research gaps and suggestions

Intersectionality: More research is needed on how caste, class, religion, and region intersect with gender to shape political representation in India. Existing quota designs often interact unevenly with other reserved categories.

National/executive leadership impacts: Comparative, causal studies of the impacts when women occupy state chief ministerial posts, cabinet positions or national executive offices are more limited; longitudinal work would help identify long-term institutional change.

Implementation research: Studying the micro-mechanisms by which party behavior undermines or supports quota goals (e.g., candidate placement, resource allocation) via mixed-methods research would help tailor reforms.

Conclusion

India's story is both hopeful and cautionary. The constitutional reservation of women at local levels created vast opportunities and produced measurable policy and symbolic benefits. Yet at higher levels — state assemblies and Parliament — women remain under-represented and face structural, cultural, and safety barriers. Empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of reservations when well-designed, and also highlights the need for complementary reforms: stronger pipelines, enforcement mechanisms, protection against political violence, and norm- change programs. The passage and thoughtful implementation of national reservation, combined with sustained investment in candidate development and institutional safeguards, offers India a credible path toward greater gender equality in political leadership and more inclusive governance.

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