

International Journal Research Publication Analysis

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AN ASSESSMENT OF THE RELEVANCE OF WOMEN POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN INDIA

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Article Received: 05 August 2026

Article Revised: 25 August 2026

Published on: 15 September 2026

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DOI: <https://doi-org/101555/ijrpa.7921>

ABSTRACT

Women representation is an important topic in modern politics, it can be called a stage of overall progress of the status of women. Representation of women in electoral politics can be helpful in making various laws, hence measures can be taken at the constitutional level to promote it, which can ultimately lead to changes in the political field in practical terms. Women representation is important for democracy, and it means active participation of women in the decision-making process. Electoral participation of women establishes a link between the public and the political elite. Moreover, electoral participation of women promotes stability and order by strengthening the legitimacy of political authority. Democracy implies universal participation of eligible citizens in the electoral process.

A functional democratic system cannot be established if the representation of women is less than the desired level. Women have always been in a less advantageous position in the socio-economic and political conditions of our society because the functioning of social institutions for centuries has pushed women into a narrow circle, so their power to negotiate has always been limited. In such a situation, true democratic spirit cannot emerge. Therefore, greater participation of women is necessary to ensure the democratic functioning of the existing system. Our Constitution has incorporated the concept of welfare which implies overall improvement in our lives. In this sense, it is necessary to mention that there are certain issues which are specific to women. These are major issues which need to be introduced and promoted. Continuous efforts are required for this purpose. These are issues which only

women can highlight and work towards solving their problems. Increased participation of women in the electoral process also ensures women empowerment. In fact, their participation is essential for the successful functioning of the democratic system. Women representation in the state or central legislature is still low, which is not a good sign of democracy. We are well aware of the ground situation of the country regarding women representation in the functioning of the government. This also brings forth the issue of harsh real gender equality. Statistically, it has been proven that women traditionally focus less on political participation. Though democratic values have been given very high regard in the Constitution of India, and the constitutional provisions emphasize on improving the democratic system of our country, there is still a long way to go for women representation in decision making. In law making, women participation is necessary. Women can play an important role and help in making laws related to women. This will ultimately result in women empowerment. Empowering women and making them come forward and occupy more and more public space strengthens democracy. In other words, women representation can bring more participation and visibility in the legislature. Which will help in creating a system to strengthen democracy in the long run.

KEYWORDS: Political Representation, Women Empowerment, Indian Constitution, Political Parties, Governance.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the participation of women in politics has been limited, reflecting broader societal structures that have relegated women to roles deemed secondary to those of men. This phenomenon, observed globally, has profound implications for the equitable administration of justice and the inclusive formulation of public policy.

In recent times, there has been a concerted effort to rectify these historical imbalances. Across the world, nations are increasingly recognizing the importance of integrating women into political systems, not merely as a matter of justice, but as a means to enrich and diversify the governance process. The inclusion of women in politics is not simply an act of redress; it is a fundamental enhancement of the democratic process, ensuring that the perspectives and needs of all constituents are adequately represented.

Turning our gaze to India, a nation rich in cultural diversity and democratic tradition, the issue of women's representation in politics takes on particular significance. Despite the strides made since independence, women remain underrepresented in both national and state

legislatures. This underrepresentation is a stark reminder of the persistent structural and societal barriers that hinder the full participation of women in public life.

The importance of addressing this issue in India cannot be overstated. A democracy that aspires to be both fair and functional must strive to reflect the diversity of its populace within its governing bodies. The inclusion of women in politics is essential for the realization of true democratic ideals. It ensures that the legislative process is informed by a multiplicity of perspectives, leading to more comprehensive and empathetic policymaking.

Women's participation in mainstream political activity has important implications for the broader arena of governance in any country. Governance relates to a set of rules, institutions and values that are involved in the management of state and society. Governance institutions and processes include political parties, parliaments, government and their interactions with society.

While the Indian democratic state is committed to the protection of individual rights within the context of citizenship, a closer look at how it operates for the women reveals that these rights are not accessible in the public and private spheres in their full potential to all the women in India. There are historical, social and cultural factors that have limited women's capacity and chances to exercise their freedom to participate in the political process. The evolution of Indian democracy through the 18 general elections so far has reflected a low representation of women in Parliament, State Legislatures, in political parties and other top decision-making bodies.

The under representation of women in the political sphere is inextricably linked with the low and inferior status of women in society in India especially in the context of the declining sex ratio, increasing violence and crimes against women and their marginalized status in employment, education and health sectors. The comparative position of Gender-related Development Index (GDI) reveals that among 177 countries, India ranks 113th, indicating its very low gender-equity status.

Women face violence inside and outside the family throughout their lives. Most women in India have very little say in decisions affecting their own lives. The cumulative effect of all this is that women tend to lack the self-confidence and skills needed to function effectively in the public sphere. The under representation of women and absence of women from positions of power and decision-making reinforces their exploitation and deprivation. It is in this context that women's greater political representation becomes even more necessary.

Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) & National Election Watch (NEW) have analyzed **51,708** candidates who contested in the current Lok Sabha and State/UT assembly elections across the country. Among them, only **5,095 (10%)** were women candidates. This analysis includes the **543 MPs** and **4,123 MLAs** of India. Among **4,666** MPs/MLAs across the country, only 464 or 10% are women. The Constitution (128th Amendment) Bill, 2023 was introduced in Lok Sabha on September 19, 2023. The Bill seeks to reserve one-third of all seats for women in Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. This report looks at participation of women in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies.

Analysis of Women Candidates and Women MPs/MLAs

- Out of total **51,708** candidates analysed who contested in the current Lok Sabha and Assembly elections across the country, only 5095, (10%) are women.
- Among **4,666** MPs/MLAs across the country, only **464** or **10%** are women.

Women Candidates Contested in Lok Sabha and Assembly Elections

Women Candidates in Lok Sabha Elections 2024

Out of **8360** candidates analysed in the **Lok Sabha elections 2024**, Only **800 (9.6%)** candidates were women.

- Out of **543** constituencies, **152 (28%)** constituencies had zero women candidates.
- Among the Lok Sabha constituencies, Baramati (Maharashtra), Secunderabad and Warangal (Telangana) had the highest number of women candidates (8 each), followed by Karur (Tamil Nadu), and Kolkata Dakshin (West Bengal) with 7 candidates each.
- Among the national parties, BJP had the highest share of women candidates **16%**, followed by INC and CPI(M) **13%** each, and BSP with **8%**. AAP did not field any women candidates among its **22** candidates while the NPP fielded **2** women candidates out of a total of **3** candidates.

Women Candidates in Current Assemblies

- Out of **43348** candidates analysed from current State and UT Assemblies, only **4295 (10%)** candidates were women.
- Out of **4123** constituencies across the country in the current assemblies, **1698 (41%)** constituencies had zero women candidates.
- Among the State and UT Assemblies, none of the states had more than **15 %** women candidates in the elections. States such as Delhi, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh and

Tripura had highest percentage of women candidates contested in their respective assembly elections.

- Among the State and UT Assembly constituencies, Guntur West (Andhra Pradesh) had the highest number of women candidates (12), followed by Limbayat (Gujarat) and Nampally (Telangana) with 8 women candidates each.
- Among the State and UT Assemblies, Odisha (14%), Delhi (14%) and Chhattisgarh (13%) have the highest share of women candidates. The lowest shares are in Nagaland (2%), Arunachal Pradesh (5%) and Jammu & Kashmir (5%).

Women Candidates in the Current Lok Sabha and State/UT Assemblies – Party Wise

Unrecognised parties nominated **1502** women, out of **13,413** candidates, followed by National Parties **1337** out of **12119** candidates, state parties **592** out of **5,926** candidates. Among Independents, 1664 out of **20,250** candidates were women.

Performance of Women Candidates

Women MPs in 18th Lok Sabha

- Among the **543** MPs in the **18th Lok Sabha**, **74 (14%)** are women MPs.
- **22** states and UTs have women MPs in the 18th Lok Sabha. The only large state without a woman MP is **Kerala**.
- West Bengal have highest number of women MPs **11**, followed by Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra **7**, and Madhya Pradesh **6**.
- BJP has the highest number of women MPs **31**, followed by INC **13**, and AITC **11**.
- Only **national parties** and **state parties** managed to get their women candidates elected. No woman candidate from any **unrecognised political party or independent** woman candidate won the election.

Higher share of women candidates won the election than male candidates

- **74 (9%)** out of **800** women candidates won the elections. Among 7,554 male candidates, 469 (6%) were elected. Additionally, 6 third gender candidates contested the elections, but none of them were elected.
- Among the women MPs, **Nimuben Jayantibhai Bambhaniya (Nimuben Bambhaniya) (BJP)** from **Bhavnagar** Constituency (Gujarat) has won with the highest vote share, i.e. 69.70% in her constituency and Shobha Karandlaje (BJP) from Bangalore North Constituency (Karnataka) has won with the highest number of votes, i.e. 9,86,049.

Women MLAs in Current Assemblies

- Among **4,123** MLAs across the country, **390 (9%)** are women.
- Among the State and UT Assemblies, Uttar Pradesh has highest number of women MLAs **47**, followed by West Bengal **40**, Bihar **29** and Madhya Pradesh **27**.
- BJP has the highest number of women MLAs **163**, followed by INC **59**, and AITC **34**.

Higher share of male candidates won the election than women candidates in the State and UT Assemblies

- **3733 (10%)** out of **39033** male candidates won the elections. Among 4295 women candidates, 390 (9%) were elected. Additionally, 20 third gender candidates contested the elections, but none of them were elected.
- Among the women MLAs, **S. S. Olish (BJP)** from **Chandel** Constituency (Manipur) has won with the highest vote share, i.e. 79.06% in her constituency and Manjula S (BJP) from Mahadevapura (SC) Constituency (Karnataka) has won with the highest number of votes, i.e. 1,81,731.

Women and Political Representation

Women in India raised the issue of representation in politics first in 1917. At that time, it was basically a demand for universal adult franchise and political participation. By 1930 women had gained the *Right to Vote*, which initially benefited women from elite families. Women's involvement in struggles for political and civil rights in India were however sought to be linked to nationalist movements in alliance with males against common foreign enemy. In any case, women's involvement in nationalist struggles changed their lives in that even though they were denied equal opportunities to shape the new state; they gained Constitutional and legal rights. But even after the *Right to Vote* became a reality for all women, their representation in the parliament, political parties and other decision-making bodies remained low even after independence and after the Indian Constitution came into force in 1950.

However, the percentage of women in legislatures and decision-making positions always remained low. Women do not share the power of decision-making and are not involved in policy making in Indian democracy in proportion to their numerical strength. Thus, there is a gap between the formal idea of women's participation and their meaningful use of power. The quest for greater political representation of women is, therefore, still relevant.

Low Political Representation of Women

The lack of economic independence becomes particularly important when the question of funding poll campaigns arises. Currently, the poll campaigns are not confined to door-to-door canvassing by candidates in 'manageable' constituencies. The constituencies extend over large areas, enveloping lakhs of people and involving the participation of the entire party set-up and the media and the press alike. Elections evoke fierce competition with muscle power playing an equally important role. All this requires money, much of which does not come from the party but has to be generated from private sources –even more so for independent candidates who do not have the support of the party apparatus behind them. Thus, men who have traditionally controlled economic power are in a better position to fight elections compared to women. The parties are also apprehensive about giving tickets to women candidates because of additional party funds that would have to be pumped into the campaign. An expression of anguish over this is found in the words of Girija Vyas:

Women get left out at the very first stage of selecting candidates on the pretext that they are not equipped to contest elections with money power and muscle power having become essential ingredients in the recipe of electoral success.

The Indian Constitution and Electoral Representation of Women

Special electoral representation for disadvantaged groups is one of the special features of the Indian Constitution, which, despite rejecting separate electorates, as they existed in British India was not averse to special electoral representation for some groups. A general electoral roll was provided for, but seats were reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Besides this, it was explicitly provided that the President could appoint two members of the Anglo-Indian community to the Lok Sabha if, in the opinion of the President, that community was not adequately represented in the Parliament. A similar provision was made for the State Legislatures. Even so, reservations play an important role in ensuring equality for all. Over the years reservations have been extended to the Other Backward Classes with regard to jobs in Government services and educational opportunities. This has been enabled by Articles 15 and 16 of the Indian Constitution, as interpreted by the Supreme Court in the famous Mandal Case.

The Indian Constitution also has a special provision pertaining to women and children. Article 15(3) of the Constitution states:

Nothing in this Article (15) shall prevent the State from making any special provision for women and children.

The introduction of the Constitution (81st Amendment) Bill, 1996 to provide an entrenched constitutional mandate for reservation of seats for women in the legislatures appears to be a logical corollary to the process of reservation in decision-making bodies for women initiated by reservation in Panchayats by the Ramakrishna Hegde government of Karnataka in 1983. It provided 25% reservation for women at village Panchayat levels in Karnataka. The lead taken by Karnataka was followed by Maharashtra. This inspired the move to reserve seats for women in panchayats and municipalities under the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution. The specific provisions introduced by the amendments were to ensure.

1. That all Panchayats reserve 33% of seats for women –including 33% of the SC and ST seats.
2. One-third of the offices of Chairperson shall be for women by rotation.

Similar provisions were made for municipalities on the 33% reservation; and sub-section 4 on the chairpersonship. The results of these experiments have been uneven and there has been angst and hostility towards women being chairpersons and who have, in some cases, not been allowed to function properly.

Women's Wider Participation and Representation

Women in India constitute nearly half of the total population of the country, but they are poorly represented in the various governance and decision-making bodies. The position depicted through the 18 general elections so far reflects a low representation of women in Parliament, State legislatures, in political parties and other decision-making bodies. Less than 8% of Parliamentary seats, less than 6% Cabinet positions, less than 4% of seats in High Courts and the Supreme Court, have been occupied by women. Less than 3% of the administrators and managers are women. The average percentage of women's representation in Parliament, Assemblies and Council of Ministers taken together has been around 10%.

The Indian Constitution guarantees to all women in the fundamental right to equality, equal voting rights and political participation. However, in spite of these constitutional and legal provisions, the ground reality is that women have not obtained adequate and proportionate representation in the legislative and other decision-making bodies.

Recent Developments

More recently major political parties have indeed made a conscious effort to induct more women into the various levels of the party organization. In spite of the efforts of political parties to induct more women, the extent of representation of women has not changed much.

The number of women candidates in the 1998 parliamentary elections was not even half the number of women in 1996 elections. In 1998 there were only 274 women candidates as against 599 in the 1996 elections. In the general elections in 1999, the same proportions of women were put up for elections by both the parties favoring 84th Amendment Bill on the reservation for women in Parliament and the parties which were opposed to it.

The Congress Party led by a woman had only 10% of women among the candidates. The BJP and the CPM had 7% of women among the candidates. The idea of 33% reservation for women in parliament was actively endorsed by most of the major political parties and this had raised expectation that many more women would be nominated to contest the elections. The election manifestoes and the public pronouncements of parties as well as the print and electronic media highlighted the idea of women's representation by reservation or by nomination of more women for elections signifying a more conscious political stand on women's representation. However, these stances did not translate into more nomination of women candidates during elections. Many parties ended up allotting some seats to women candidates only as a token and to symbolize their pro-women egalitarian policy.

Women in Power

In spite of the low political representation of women in Indian politics, it must be noted that some women leaders have an important place in Indian politics today. Late Jayalalitha as leader of AIADMK, Mamata Bannerji as leader of Trinamul Congress and Mayawati as leader of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) are instances in point. Some of them head important and strong regional political parties which have been in alliance with major national political parties. In addition, the example of Indira Gandhi who rose to be Prime Minister of India, and later of Sonia Gandhi, leader of the Congress Party, both of whom had the dynastic advantage underpinning their leadership and position of power and decision-making in the Congress party and the government can hardly be ignored. But the positions of authority of these women leaders did not include any specific mandate to address only women issues.

Obstacles to Women's Representation

The political representation of women has historically faced a lot of challenges in terms of economic, cultural, educational, and institutional factors. There are many barriers that hinder the progress of women in every aspect. In terms of cultural and social norms, traditionally gender-based roles are divided between men and women. Women in India are relegated to domestic roles, and their responsibility and work are confined to households only. They are

not even part of their family decision-making process, which impacts women's representation not even in external affairs but also in internal affairs. These types of norms also hinder the progress of women in every sphere and make her low esteem. This social norm excluded the women from public and political spheres, reinforcing the belief that women are always subjected to do household work and politics is a domain reserved for men only.

Lack of finance also acts as a huge barrier for women's representation because, without financial stability, she just acts as a commodity. There is a link between financial and political empowerment because, with financial stability, she will self-esteem. Women's economic dependency on males such as father, brother, or husband, which acts as a significant barrier to political involvement. In terms of economic barriers, income disparities, limited access to financial resources, and high campaign costs, huge expenditure on politics makes women more vulnerable to being representable in politics which further fuel the issue. Institutional and systemic bias within structure also perpetuate gender inequality.

In India, most of the women married early due to poverty, lack of education, and lack of financial stability. Marriage is a part of equal consent, but sometimes marriage also acts as a barrier to women's representation in politics when she belongs to an uneducated family. The role of background of women also impacts the women's representation because when she is not even a part of her own family decision-making process, then how can she be part of higher politics. In grassroots politics, women have 33% of reservation, but the concept of Pradhan-Pati and proxy politics is prevalent in rural India, which limits the women's ability in politics as her husband acts as a Pradhan on her behalf because, according to them, women should be constrained to domestic work only, women do not have knowledge of how to run politics, then then it is better to make her stay away.

Women and Political Reservation

Some scholars and activists raise the concept of the 'Critical Mass' to explain the importance of providing reservation to the women in the legislative. They stress the significance of the concept of critical mass on the basis that if women make for a significant number in the legislative body, they will bring considerable changes in the overall business of the legislative. Critical mass theory refers to the critical number of people that can influence change and affect policy. This number has been placed at as low as 15%, with the highest being 30% before women are able to make a substantial difference in politics. Together these women will be able to work more effectively for women friendly policy changes and influence their male colleagues to accept and approve bills promoting gender equality.

More than 103 countries have taken measures to increase women's participation in formal politics through reservations. In India this process started in the 1930s. Women's organizations like the All India Women's Council, the National Council for Women in India and the Women's India Association demanded women's political participation. The issue of reservation for women has been an agenda since pre-independence days. However, reservation has been a contentious issue and the political parties lack commitment to increase women's representation.

CONCLUSION

The low political representation of women has only worked to perpetuate the unequal status of 'suffering' by them. The inevitable consequence has been that their concerns and fundamental needs are never adequately articulated. The programmes for their welfare are not backed by any political will due to which their implementation remains only on paper. In fact, they are just populist measures announced by the party in power from time to time. Various laws that are passed do not consider the 'woman's viewpoint' which often results in discriminatory provisions in the laws. Low representation makes it impossible for women to make their voices heard and obliges them to make compromises. This goes against the ethos of a democratic society committed to equality irrespective of sex. Thus, it becomes necessary to reserve seats for women in the legislatures. Empowerment through reservation of seats in legislation would enable the women to voice their demands for justice.

Women's power and initiative usually include the most vulnerable and has the potential to uplift the lives of women, men and children. Women's participation plays a crucial role in the representation of all individuals irrespective of their sex and age. Women can no longer be viewed as a passive beneficiary of the government programmes and should be seen as active agents with the potential to uplift the society and trigger its transformation. Increasing political positions for women opens doors to yet unexplored avenues. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act is a crucial step which enables forming of a critical mass of women in the local bodies. These women have showed their responsiveness and accountability despite the drawbacks and challenges they face owing to the patriarchal and hierarchical social structures.

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