

Electoral Engagement and Political Representation: An Analytical Study of Women's Participation in India's Democratic Process

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Abstract

This study investigates the persistent disconnect in women's political participation in India, where their consistently high voter turnout stands in stark contrast to their minimal presence in Parliament. Although constitutional provisions guarantee equality and women demonstrate strong engagement as voters, their representation within formal political structures remains disproportionately low. Using the 2024 Lok Sabha elections as a primary reference point, the research interrogates core questions surrounding this imbalance: Why does women's active electoral participation fail to translate into equitable parliamentary representation? Why have legislative commitments to equality not succeeded in ensuring a proportional presence of women? What systemic and societal barriers inhibit women from attaining equal footing in political leadership? Does politics continue to be perceived – and function – as a male-dominated sphere deemed unsuitable for women? To address these questions, the study employs data from the Election Commission of India, the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), the Global Gender Gap Report, and the Inter-Parliamentary Union. These sources underpin an analysis of women's roles as voters, electoral candidates, and parliamentarians, while international comparisons further contextualize India's position in global rankings of female political representation. The central argument posits that despite women's broad participation as voters, societal expectations for them to pursue elected office or assume leadership roles remain limited. This hesitation is shaped by entrenched socio-cultural constructs, including patriarchal norms, rigid gender prescriptions, and longstanding biases discouraging women from entering the public political domain. Structural obstacles such as restricted access to political networks, inadequate financial resources, and weak institutional support – compound these constraints. The paper also engages with the ethical dimensions of gender disparity in political institutions and the moral obligations of democratic systems to ensure fair and inclusive representation. Additionally, it investigates how knowledge about women's political participation is produced, interpreted, and circulated, and how these narratives influence public attitudes and policy design. Overall, the study seeks to offer a comprehensive assessment of the challenges and transformative pathways necessary to advance gender parity in India's political representation.

Keywords: Women's political participation, gender representation, patriarchy and power structures, lok sabha elections 2024, political leadership barriers

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INTRODUCTION

In the world's largest democracy, India, women make up nearly half of the electorate, yet their representation in the Indian Parliament remains strikingly low. This paradox is particularly glaring when juxtaposed with their achievements in other fields. For instance, in academics, Gagandeep Kang, a globally acclaimed virologist and the first Indian woman to be elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society, has contributed significantly to science and public health research. In business, Kiran

Mazumdar-Shaw, the founder and chairperson of Biocon, has built a billion-dollar enterprise that has revolutionized biopharmaceuticals in India and beyond. In sports, P.V. Sindhu, a badminton world champion and Olympic medalist, and Mary Kom, a six-time world boxing champion and Olympic medalist, have brought international recognition and pride to the country. Despite these remarkable successes, women's participation in political leadership remains disproportionately low, reflecting structural and cultural barriers that persist in India's political landscape. This disparity highlights the systemic barriers rooted in patriarchal structures, institutional biases, and societal perceptions that continue to marginalize women's roles in politics. The political sphere remains a male-dominated arena where women encounter structural and societal obstacles that limit their participation and success. This marginalization raises critical concerns about the efficacy of current policies and societal perceptions of women's leadership roles. The exclusion of women from political processes risks creating policies that reflect primarily masculine perspectives, failing to address women's specific concerns and needs (Connell, 1990) [1]. As Manuka Khanna [2009] [2] notes, achieving true political equality requires recognizing women as "equal citizens" capable of exercising autonomy and contributing meaningfully to decision-making processes. Political participation, representation, and leadership roles remain crucial indicators of women's status in any society.

A rich body of feminist literature has explored the root causes of women's underrepresentation in politics, emphasizing the structural barriers that persist globally. In the Indian context, these insights are particularly relevant, as deeply entrenched socio-cultural expectations continue to confine women to domestic roles, limiting their opportunities to engage in political processes. This structural marginalization not only restricts women's political participation but also perpetuates systemic inequalities that hinder equitable representation within India's democratic institutions. This issue is compounded by epistemic injustice, as outlined by Miranda Fricker [2007], wherein women's voices and knowledge are undervalued in political decision-making and public discourse. In India, women's perspectives on issues like education, healthcare, and gender violence are often excluded, depriving governance of diverse insights and hindering equitable representation. Therefore, addressing epistemic injustice is essential to achieve genuine political representation in India.

This study explores two critical concepts central to understanding women's underrepresentation in Indian politics. The representation gap refers to the disparity between women's significant electoral participation and their inadequate presence in legislative bodies. Despite women constituting 13.6% of the current Lok Sabha, their elected representation falls far short of gender parity. Meanwhile, the outcome gap highlights how this underrepresentation translates into inadequate attention to women-specific concerns, such as healthcare, gender violence, and economic empowerment, within policy frameworks. Together, these gaps illustrate the multifaceted challenges that hinder women's full inclusion in governance.

Structural and systemic barriers, often used throughout this paper and discussed in section fifth of the paper, encompass deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms, discriminatory practices, and institutional biases. These barriers manifest in political parties' reluctance to nominate women candidates, limited access to political resources and networks, and marginalization within party hierarchies. For example, in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, major political parties like the BJP and INC fielded only 16% and 13% women candidates, respectively. Such inequitable practices reinforce women's exclusion from key decision-making roles and perpetuate their underrepresentation in critical areas like economic and security policies.

This paper is structured to address these issues comprehensively. This paper examines the disparity between gender parity in political participation and representation in India through eight interconnected sections. The first section, *Gender Parity in Voting vs Representation*, analyzes voting trends, contesting patterns, and the persistent representation gap despite high female voter turnout. The second section, *Constitutional and Legislative Status and Representation*, explores the outcome gap in achieving gender equality and includes regional case studies to illustrate disparities across states. The

third section, *Role and Purpose of Political Parties*, investigates the critical role of political parties in shaping women's representation, focusing on ticket distribution in the 2024 general election, case studies of notable female candidates, and lessons from both domestic and international practices. The fourth section, *Comparison with Global Parliaments*, contrasts India's efforts with global benchmarks, detailing policies adopted by other parliaments and the lessons they offer. The fifth section, *Barriers to Women's Political Leadership*, identifies structural, systemic, and patriarchal obstacles that hinder women's advancement in politics. The sixth section, *Moral and Ethical Implications*, delves into the normative arguments for equal representation. In contrast, the seventh section, *Epistemological Impact*, examines how the exclusion of women impacts the diversity and inclusivity of political decision-making. Finally, the *Conclusion and Recommendations* section synthesizes these insights and proposes actionable strategies to address the gender disparity in political representation, fostering a more equitable and inclusive democracy.

Amartya Sen's capability approach offers an essential framework for comprehending the disparity between women's engagement in political participation as voters and their insufficient representation in leadership roles. posits that genuine freedom encompasses the capacity to attain the type of life one cherishes, which also entails the opportunity to engage in political decision-making. While women in India have the legislative right to vote, their capacity for substantive political participation is undermined by systemic inequities that include limited access to political networks, resources, and opportunities. Sen emphasizes substantive freedom, which points out the limitations of formal equality in the political sphere. With due support and opportunities, the participation of women can turn out to be more than merely superficial and highly symbolic. Nancy Fraser contributes to this discourse by asserting that the realization of genuine gender equality necessitates both redistribution and recognition. Redistribution refers to confronting economic and material disparities that disproportionately impact women, whereas recognition entails the acknowledgement and incorporation of women's voices and experiences within political frameworks. Fraser's framework underlines that overcoming both economic impediments and cultural bias is essential for women's significant presence in political institutions (Fraser, 1997) [3].

At the time of India's independence in 1947, the granting of equal voting rights to women marked a groundbreaking and progressive step, positioning India as a leader in gender equality within democratic participation. This formal recognition of women as equal stakeholders in the democratic process held immense symbolic and practical significance, promising an inclusive political landscape. However, while the right to vote empowered women as active participants in elections, it failed to dismantle the systemic barriers that prevent their meaningful political representation. After 77 years of independence, despite being enthusiastic voters, Indian women remain underrepresented in electoral contests and leadership roles. This persistent disparity reveals a critical gap between the promise of political equality at independence and its incomplete realization, as deep-rooted socio-cultural and institutional challenges continue to limit women's ability to contest elections and hold positions of power.

This critical gap in the recent electoral data shows that women now constitute nearly half of the electorate in India. Female voter turnout has seen a continuous improvement, reflecting the growing political participation of women. In the 2024 elections, the female voter turnout reached 65.78%, almost at the same level as the overall voter turnout. Yet, such an increase in voter participation has not led to similar representation in legislative bodies. Women remain significantly underrepresented in Parliament, with their elected representation far below that of their male colleagues. In the present 18th Lok Sabha, only 13.6% of Members of Parliament (74 out of 543) are women, representing a decline from 14.4% in the previous 17th Lok Sabha (Election Commission of India, 2024). This disparity emphasizes a significant shortfall in realizing genuine political equality and accentuates the necessity to investigate the obstacles hindering women's attainment of equal standing in political leadership roles. Political parties are instrumental in maintaining this underrepresentation.

Political parties play a major role in due representation of any gender, class or category. Reluctance to give tickets to women candidates, lack of internal allocations for women, and marginalization of women within party hierarchies can be considered to be a few obstacles to women's political participation in India (Rai, 2017) [4]. In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) nominated 69 women out of 440 candidates, with 31 winning seats, constituting 16% of their total nominees. Similarly, the Indian National Congress (INC) fielded 41 women out of 327 candidates, with 13 securing victories, making up 13% of their total nominees. These figures highlight the inadequate allocation of candidatures given to women by political parties. Even the highest numbers of representation that we find from major political parties such as BJP and Congress are very low when observed from a comprehensive perspective. Women are underrepresented in key policy-making areas such as economics, agriculture, security, and law, often confined to roles in women or child-related ministries. The internal structures of political parties thus remain a significant barrier to enhancing women's political representation (Mishra, 2019) [5].

This study raises critical questions regarding the persistent gender gap in parliamentary representation: Why does gender parity in voting not translate to gender parity in Parliament? What societal, cultural, and structural barriers prevent women from achieving equal status in political leadership? Do political parties exhibit reluctance in nominating women candidates, thereby limiting their opportunities for representation? These questions remain pertinent due to the consistently low level of women's representation in Parliament, despite numerous studies such as Krook [2010] [6], Inter-Parliamentary Union Report [2023], etc. addressing the global and regional challenges women face in achieving political empowerment. This paper aims to investigate these inquiries within the framework of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, utilizing data from the Election Commission of India, the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), the Global Gender Gap Report, and the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Drawing on the data from 1998 to 2023, the study highlights the underrepresentation of women in Indian politics despite their active electoral participation and explores actionable pathways to achieving gender parity in political representation.

GENDER PARITY IN VOTING VS. REPRESENTATION

This section will explore the growing gender parity in voting, juxtaposed with the stagnation in women's representation in the Lok Sabha from 1998 to 2024. By examining the data, we will assess how the increasing participation of women as voters has yet to translate into proportional political representation. Additionally, regional case studies will provide insights into how different parts of India approach the challenge of enhancing women's political representation.

"I measure the progress of any nation by the degree of progress which women have achieved," observed Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, emphasizing the centrality of women's advancement to national development. However, despite constituting 48.5% of India's population, women hold only a fraction of parliamentary seats, reflecting a glaring gap in representation. This disparity persists even though women are active voters, as evidenced by their turnout in the 2019 general elections, which stood at 67.2%, nearly matching the overall turnout of 67.4%. From this data, it can be inferred that politics continues to be perceived as a male-dominated arena. If women's progress is indeed a measure of national progress, why does their participation in the nation's highest decision-making body remain so minimal? These statistics compel us to critically examine the cultural, structural, and institutional barriers that perpetuate this disparity, even in the world's largest democracy.

During India's first general elections in 1951, about 80 million women gained voting rights, but 2.8 million did not enroll with their legislative names. The Election Commission rendered the registrations of women whose familial designations like "wife" and "mother" were used to register them as invalid. To rectify this concern, sustained efforts at raising awareness were made, and these women were granted more time to make the necessary corrections in voter lists for the election in 1951–52. This historical episode highlights not only the systemic barriers that women faced at the very inception of Indian democracy but also the lack of individual recognition afforded to them within a patriarchal society.

Even today, echoes of this systemic exclusion are visible in subtler forms, such as tokenism in political spaces and the persistent marginalization of women from leadership roles. While women now actively participate in elections as voters, their identities are still often overshadowed by cultural and structural biases that limit their representation in decision-making bodies. This historical precedent serves as a reminder that the fight for gender equality in politics is not merely about formal rights but also about dismantling deep-seated societal norms that perpetuate inequities. Connecting this to the present, the question arises: are current efforts to improve women's political participation sufficient to overcome these ingrained barriers?

While women's voter participation has reached almost par with the total voter turnout, the Lok Sabha elections 2024 mark great strides for women's empowerment as electorates. However, this strong representation in voting does not translate into parliamentary representation, where only 14.4% of the 2019 Lok Sabha members were women. Despite the rise in female voter participation since the electoral period of 1951–52, structural obstacles have persistently obstructed the parliamentary representation of women: gender discriminatory processes for party nominations, entrenched social perceptions about political authority, unequal distribution of unpaid labour, and representation in parliament has fluctuated and at times declined.

The Tables 1 and 2 below provide statistics on women as voters and contestants from the 1998 to 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

Voting Trends: Analysis of Voter Turnout Data from 1998 to 2024.

Table 1. Trends in female voter turnout compared to total voter turnout in lok sabha elections (1998–2024).

Election	Female voter turnout	Total voter turnout
2024	65.78	65.79
2019	67.2	67.4
2014	65.6	66.4
2009	55.8	58.2
2004	44.65	48.74
1999	55.6	60
1998	57.7	62

Source: ECI and PIB

Table 2. Contesting trends: analysis of women contestants from 1998 to 2024.

Election	Total candidate	Female candidate	Women won	Winning (%)	Women in parliament (%)
2024	8360	679	74	10.89	13.6
2019	8039	720	78	10.83	14.4
2014	8251	668	61	9.3	11.23
2009	8070	556	59	10.61	10.86
2004	5435	355	45	12.68	8.2
1999	4648	284	49	17.25	8.47
1998	4750	274	43	15.69	7.91

Source: ECI, PIB, and MyNeta

The increasing voter turnout among women in India over the past two decades reflects a notable shift in societal attitudes toward women's political agency. This upward trend signifies not only greater access to the electoral process but also an acknowledgment of women's role as active participants in shaping the nation's political landscape. Scholars like Pippa Norris [2004] link such developments to broader political enfranchisement and democratic vitality, while Pamela Paxton and Melanie M. Hughes [2014] argue that

enhanced participation by women is a critical marker of societal progress toward gender equality. Despite this advancement, the growing participation of women as voters has yet to translate into equal representation in political leadership, highlighting the persistent barriers within India's political system. This incongruity – active participation alongside underrepresentation – underscores the need for systemic changes to bridge the gap between voting equality and political power.

The data from the Lok Sabha elections between 1998 and 2024 highlights a significant disparity between women's political participation as voters and their representation in Parliament. While female voter turnout has steadily approached parity with general turnout over the years, the proportion of women in Parliament has lagged far behind. Representation of women in the Lok Sabha has increased only marginally, from 7.91% in 1998 to 13.6% in 2024, underscoring the persistent structural and systemic barriers that prevent women from achieving equitable political leadership.

Representation Gap: Comparison of Voter Turnout with the Number of Women Elected to Parliament

The 2019 general election marked a significant milestone in India's political history, with the highest-ever number of female contestants [726] and women Members of Parliament [78]. This marks a substantial rise from the 1957 general election, where only 45 women contested. Over the years, the percentage of women in Parliament increased from 4.5% in 1957 to 14.4% in 2019, reflecting gradual progress in women's political participation. In contrast, the number of male candidates grew from 1,474 in 1957 to 7,322 in 2019, a five-fold increase, compared to a 16-fold increase for women. [1] Despite this impressive growth in female participation, women have consistently represented less than 10% of the total candidates, and their numbers have never exceeded 1,000. This stark difference in growth rates underscores the persistent representation gap of women in political leadership.

Recognizing women's political representation as a matter of equity and social justice is important. Still, it is equally essential to understand it as a means to enhance the quality of democracy and governance as part of democratic development. Involving women at all levels of political leadership is crucial, not only because they represent half of the population but also because equal representation is a core component of human rights and social justice. This equality strengthens democracy by ensuring that governance is more inclusive and representative of society as a whole.

Anne Phillips [1995] emphasizes that “democracy is not just about who votes, but who has a voice in the deliberations,” highlighting the importance of diverse voices in democratic institutions. Similarly, Shirin M. Rai [2003] argues that “the quality of democracy is compromised when the voices of women, who constitute nearly half the electorate, are underrepresented in decision-making bodies.” Both Phillips and Rai stress that true democratic governance requires the inclusion of women's perspectives to achieve a balanced and effective democratic system.

CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGISLATIVE STATUS AND REPRESENTATION: OUTCOME GAP

This section examines the constitutional provisions and legislative frameworks aimed at promoting gender equality and enhancing women's political representation in India. It highlights key legislative measures, such as the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which empowered local self-governments, and the Women's Reservation Bill, which proposes reserved seats in Parliament for women. While these provisions were designed to improve political participation, their implementation has faced significant hurdles, and gaps persist between legislative mandates and the actual participation of women in politics. To better understand these challenges, regional case studies are discussed, focusing on how state-level policies and initiatives have impacted women's political involvement. These case studies will illustrate the variations in success and barriers across different regions, shedding light on the challenges in translating constitutional provisions into tangible political outcomes for women.

The outcome gap in this context refers to the disconnect between the legislative provisions designed to increase female political participation and their practical outcomes. Although the constitutional and

legislative frameworks, including the Women's Reservation Bill and affirmative action measures like reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions, have been implemented, the desired results – namely, a significant increase in women's representation – are still lacking. The underlying reasons for this outcome include deep-rooted societal norms, political resistance, and systemic barriers that continue to undermine women's political agency. The term "outcome gap" accurately reflects this situation, as the existing legal frameworks do not yield proportional representation, signaling the need for both effective implementation and transformation of societal attitudes.

Mahatma Gandhi stated, "Women are the companions of men, gifted with equal mental capacities," underscoring his belief that women deserve equal rights across political and social spheres (Gandhi, *Collected Works*, 1948). This commitment to gender parity is embedded within the Indian Constitution, which explicitly prioritizes the protection of women's rights in both public and private domains. Key constitutional provisions affirm this vision: Article 14 guarantees equality before the law, Article 15 prohibits discrimination based on gender, and Article 16 ensures equal opportunity in public employment. Further reinforcing these rights, Article 326 grants universal suffrage, enabling all citizens, regardless of gender, to participate in elections for the House of the People and Legislative Assemblies. Article 84 permits women to contest elections and hold public office.

To encourage women's political engagement, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments [1993] established a mandate reserving one-third of seats in Panchayats and Municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for women's leadership in local governance. This legislative measure has significantly increased female participation in decision-making at the grassroots level, fostering empowerment and gender inclusivity in governance structures. Additionally, the establishment of the National Commission for Women (NCW) by an Act of Parliament in 1990 has provided a dedicated institution to advocate for women's rights and ensure the enforcement of legislative protections.

These constitutional provisions are strengthened by affirmative action measures that address the socio-economic and political disadvantages faced by women (Bala, 1997). This principle, anchored in the belief that democracy necessitates both equality and justice, has inspired policies like the 2023 Women's Reservation Bill, which seeks to extend gender-based reservation to Parliament. Such measures promote political justice by ensuring women's participation in decision-making, thereby addressing historical inequities. However, despite these legislative protections, women are still underrepresented in the Lok Sabha, India's lower house of Parliament. This shows that legislative measures alone are not enough. Achieving true gender equality in political representation requires not only effective enforcement of legislative provisions but also meaningful shifts in societal attitudes about women in leadership. This highlights the need for both transformative social change and strong legislative mandates to ensure lasting progress.

Outcome Gaps: Disparity Between Legislative Provisions and Political Participation

Despite India's strong constitutional and legislative framework designed to promote gender equality, the underrepresentation of women in Parliament contradicts the democratic values enshrined in the Constitution. The gap between legislative measures and actual political participation highlights that law alone has not been sufficient to achieve gender equality in politics. A prime example of this is the Women's Reservation Bill of 2023. First introduced in 1996, the bill aimed to reserve 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies for women. Over the next 26 years, the bill faced several setbacks, being introduced multiple times – in 1998, 1999, 2002, and 2008 – but each time, it lapsed due to political disputes and the dissolution of the Lok Sabha. Although the bill was approved by the Rajya Sabha in 2008, it was rejected by the Lok Sabha, underscoring the persistent political resistance to increasing women's representation. It was not until 2023 that the bill was finally passed, marking a significant milestone for women in Indian politics. However, its implementation has been delayed, with the earliest possible execution now scheduled for the 2029 elections, as it requires a new census and a delimitation exercise. This ongoing delay emphasizes the persistent barriers to women's political participation, even after decades of legislative effort.

At the grassroots level, challenges persist. While the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments ensure reservations for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, which has led to the election of 1.4 million women in rural local bodies (comprising 46% of total representatives), the practice of "Sarpanch Pati" – where husbands act as proxies for elected women – dilutes the effectiveness of these reservations.[2] This illustrates a broader issue: while legislative provisions exist, societal norms and local political structures continue to undermine women's political agency. Nonetheless, the significant representation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions has created an important pathway for their political participation, setting the stage for future female leaders and challenging traditional gender norms in leadership. Scholars like Nivedita Menon have argued that the gap between legislative equality and substantive political equality reflects broader societal resistance to women's leadership (Menon, 2004). Feminist political theorist Anne Phillips also emphasizes that the integrity of democracy is compromised when nearly half of the population is underrepresented in decision-making institutions. Phillips asserts that a true democracy goes beyond formal equality, requiring active participation and representation of women at all levels (Phillips, 1995).

These ongoing gaps in implementation underscore the need for more than just legislative reforms. Achieving meaningful change requires addressing the societal attitudes and power dynamics that consistently marginalize women in politics. While provisions like reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions have enabled significant female participation at the local level, deeply entrenched cultural practices continue to undermine their impact. Therefore, it is essential not only to strengthen legislative measures but also to engage political parties, which play a key role in shaping the political landscape, to ensure that women's voices are fully represented and heard in all spheres of governance.

To gain the better understanding of these challenges, it is essential to examine how various regions in India address the question of women's representation. The following case studies explain how state policies (e.g., Kerala, Tamil Nadu), political undertakings (e.g., West Bengal, Rajasthan) and social activism (e.g., Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan) affect women's political involvement. By analyzing these regional experiences, the study will contribute to the improved understanding of what enables or hampers women's political participation and how interventions to increase the gender quota can be implemented in different contexts.

These states have been chosen to reflect a diverse set of experiences across India – Kerala and Uttar Pradesh for their focus on policy frameworks like gender quotas, West Bengal and Rajasthan for their political dynamics and leadership roles, and Tamil Nadu for its rich history of social movements influencing women's political representation. Together, these case studies capture the varied socio-political and cultural landscapes shaping women's participation in Indian politics, offering insights into the successes and challenges across contexts.

Regional Case Studies on Women's Political Representation

Kerala: Pioneering Gender Quota

Kerala's use of gender quotas, particularly in local body elections, has been a model for promoting women's political participation in India. The state's introduction of a 50% reservation for women in local elections in 2009 catalyzed significant progress in women's representation at the grassroots level. By the 2015 local body elections, women occupied nearly half of the seats in local governments. This policy has had a positive spillover effect, encouraging higher levels of political participation at the state and national levels. For instance, the number of women candidates in the 2021 Kerala Legislative Assembly elections reached around 100, marking an increase compared to previous years [3].

However, the success of gender quotas in Kerala warrants a critical examination. While the quotas have been instrumental in achieving gender parity at the local level, the extent to which they have influenced higher-level political participation remains debatable. Kerala's political culture, which values social equity, may have contributed to the success of quotas, but the same conditions might not

apply universally across India. In contrast, other states with similar quotas, such as Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, have seen less consistent outcomes in terms of female representation at higher political levels. Furthermore, the gender quota in Kerala has not completely eliminated patriarchal structures within political parties, as seen in the limited representation of women in the leadership positions within parties. Therefore, while the quota system has been successful in Kerala, its impact on broader gender equality in politics remains complex and context-dependent.

West Bengal: The Impact of Political Encouragement

In West Bengal, the rise in female political representation can be attributed to a combination of political patronage and state-driven measures. The introduction of a 50% reservation for women in municipal elections has facilitated greater participation of women at the local level. The state's success in electing 11 female MPs to the 18th Lok Sabha reflects this increased political engagement. However, the relationship between Mamata Banerjee's leadership and the increase in female MPs requires a more nuanced examination. Her leadership has undoubtedly played a role in increasing the visibility of women in West Bengal's political sphere. As the first woman to hold the office of Chief Minister in the state, Banerjee has positioned herself as a trailblazer for women in politics. Her leadership has encouraged the nomination and election of more women candidates, fostering a political environment where women are seen as viable political leaders. Banerjee's administration has prioritized women's issues, such as social welfare and gender equality, which have resonated with women voters.

However, it is important to question whether Banerjee's leadership directly correlates with the increase in female MPs or whether other factors, such as the broader political context, also played a role. While Mamata Banerjee's leadership has certainly created opportunities for women, the underrepresentation of women in national politics suggests that the mere presence of a female leader at the top does not automatically result in gender parity in the political system. West Bengal's example highlights the importance of not only political patronage and leadership but also institutional reforms and cultural shifts that can support long-term gender equality in political representation.

Challenges and Progress in Uttar Pradesh

Uttar Pradesh offers a unique situation with significant challenges in attaining gender equality. Even with its high population, the state has had challenges in terms of inadequate female participation in both local and national-level elections. Historically, the political environment and patriarchal norms of the state have affected the involvement of women (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). Nevertheless, recent efforts, such as the implementation of women's reservations in local panchayats, have shown some advancement. While the 33% reservation for women in panchayat elections has resulted in more female involvement at the local level, this development is yet to be reflected in state and national legislation.

Successes and Challenges in Rajasthan: A Local Perspective

Rajasthan gives a compelling case for both the progress and the challenges surrounding women's political representation. While the state has seen notable achievements in women's participation in politics, it also highlights the persistent barriers that hinder gender equality. The 2018 Rajasthan Legislative Assembly elections saw the election of 24 women, indicating a promising increase in female political participation. However, in the 2023 elections, this number declined to 20, showing that, despite the increasing number of female candidates and voters, significant obstacles still exist. The 20 elected women included representatives from major parties, with nine each from the BJP and Congress and two independents.[5] Rajasthan's example underscores the importance of continued efforts to break down barriers to women's participation in political decision-making processes. Despite having a relatively high percentage of female voters, the underrepresentation of women in the state legislature demonstrates that political systems must continue to evolve to ensure gender parity.

An Analysis of Social Movements in Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu has seen significant progress in women's political representation due to both social movements and proactive political initiatives. The state's introduction of a 33% reservation for women

in municipal elections has notably increased female participation in governance (Rai, 2003). Social movements advocating for gender equality have exerted pressure on political parties, encouraging the nomination of more female candidates. This trend is reflected in the emergence of prominent female leaders, such as Jayalalithaa, and in the policies of M.K. Stalin, who actively sought to include more women in the party's election campaigns. These efforts have facilitated a greater presence of women in higher levels of political candidacy, though achieving equitable representation in the Lok Sabha remains a challenge, as in many other states (Jha & Kumar, 2014).

An analysis of regional case studies sheds light on the impact of localized policies and social movements on women's political representation. Organizations such as the All India Women Conference, Stree Shakti Movement, and Self-Employed Women's Association have been instrumental in challenging entrenched political structures and mobilizing women to participate in local elections, thereby amplifying their voices in policymaking. The successful implementation of gender quotas in Kerala, patronage-based strategies in West Bengal, persistent challenges in Uttar Pradesh, and activism-led initiatives in Tamil Nadu all exemplify diverse strategies and their varied outcomes in advancing women's political involvement. These examples illustrate both the methods employed to promote gender equality and the differing levels of success across states.

Despite these localized efforts, achieving gender equality in political representation remains a pressing issue, particularly at the national level. Democracy's core principle is the equitable representation of the collective will and interests of all citizens. With women comprising nearly half of India's population yet holding only 13.6% of seats in the Lok Sabha, concerns arise regarding the inclusiveness of this democratic ideal. Although the concept of "one person, one vote" is intended to ensure equal representation, the underrepresentation of women in Parliament suggests that their perspectives and needs are not being sufficiently acknowledged.

This stark imbalance between high female voter turnout and low representation in Parliament underscores the limitations of legislative and institutional reforms in addressing systemic gender inequities. While laws and policies provide a framework for equality, their implementation and impact are heavily influenced by political institutions, particularly political parties. As gatekeepers of electoral politics, political parties play a pivotal role in shaping candidate selection, distributing tickets, and advancing gender representation within their ranks. Understanding the role and purpose of political parties in this context is crucial to identifying the barriers and opportunities for women in Indian politics. The next section delves into how political parties influence women's political participation and representation, focusing on their role in the 2024 general elections and examining notable female candidates.

THE ROLE AND PURPOSE OF POLITICAL PARTIES

Historically, the political parties in India have a significant role in the extent of women's involvement in politics. With the rise in the number of women voting independently on certain matters, referred to as "women's causes," political parties have shown an increasing inclination to engage local women leaders to secure the pool of votes (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Roy & Sopariwala, 2019). However, despite this active engagement at the local level, the representation of women in higher political positions, particularly in Parliament, continues to be disproportionately low. The section aims to explore the preference of political parties towards women representatives.

Let us look at the Tables 3 and 4 below that represents the ticket distribution to women by various political parties in general election 2024.

Women Elected in General Election 2024

Table 3. Ticket Distribution in General Election 2024.

Political party	Female elected
BJP	69 women candidates, 31 elected
INC	41 women candidates, 13 elected
TMC	11 women candidates, 11 elected
SP	5 women elected
DMK	3 women elected
JDU	2 women elected
RJD	1 woman elected
LJP	2 women elected
Apna Dal	1 woman elected
TDP	1 woman elected
YSRCP	1 woman elected
SAD	1 woman elected
JMM	1 woman elected
NCP	1 woman elected

Table 4.

Political PARTIES	Female%
NTK	50
LJP	40
NCP	40
JMM	33
BJD	33
RJD	29
TMC	25
SP	20

Source For T3 And T4: Times of India and Election Comission of India

Despite the increasing number of female voters in India, major political parties continue to show reluctance in nominating women candidates, particularly for national-level representation. For the 2024 general elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) fielded 69 female candidates, of whom 31 were elected. The Congress nominated 41 women, with 13 securing seats, while the Trinamool Congress (TMC) had 11 female candidates, all of whom were successfully elected.[6] This distribution highlights a continued gender imbalance in candidate selection, indicating an ongoing bias within political parties. The analysis underscores that political parties still hesitate to nominate women candidates in the Lok Sabha, reinforcing the systemic gender inequality in electoral politics.

Empirical evidence further highlights the marginalization, showing that women are consistently underrepresented in decision-making positions. By 2024, there were only 74 female ministers in the Indian Parliament, and Mamata Banerjee remains the only woman to have served as Chief Minister of a state. Since 1963, only 16 women have held the position of Chief Minister, and Indira Gandhi remains the sole female Prime Minister of India. The limited representation of women at high political levels emphasizes the disconnect between women's increasing participation as voters and their continued underrepresentation in leadership roles within political parties.

The absence of adequate legislative provisions is not the sole cause of this disparity; deeply ingrained social attitudes and internal party policies also play a significant role. In 1971, 74% of women did not identify with any political party, compared to 55% of men. By 1989, this figure had increased to 79% for women and 70% for men (Chhibber, 2002). This disengagement from political parties has contributed to the lack of female representation in top political positions. Political parties, recognized

as the gatekeepers of electoral power, have significant control over who holds elected office at all levels (International IDEA, 2016). Although some parties have introduced voluntary internal gender quotas, these measures have yet to bring about substantial changes in the male-dominated power structures within the parties.

Case Studies of Triumphant Female Candidates

Despite the significant barriers women face in Indian politics, several notable women have successfully risen to leadership positions, demonstrating the potential for female political authority. Indira Gandhi, India's first and only female Prime Minister, remains a towering figure in Indian political history. Her leadership during pivotal moments in the country's post-independence journey, particularly her role during the 1971 India-Pakistan war, continues to inspire political discourse. Similarly, Mamata Banerjee's rise to the position of Chief Minister of West Bengal highlights her capacity to navigate and challenge the male-dominated political space, marking her as one of the most influential female leaders in the country.

In addition to these pioneers, women such as Nirmala Sitharaman, who transitioned from a spokesperson for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to the country's Finance Minister, and Sonia Gandhi, a key leader of the Congress Party, have also made significant contributions to party politics and the national discourse. However, these successes also shed light on the structural barriers that continue to hinder broader gender representation in Parliament. Political parties' reluctance to elevate women to higher leadership positions at the national level reflects ongoing challenges in achieving gender parity in Indian politics. It is also important to note that Sonia Gandhi, despite being a woman and the head of a major political party, has not been able to ensure an adequate number of women candidates or leaders within the Indian National Congress. This phenomenon reflects the concept of patriarchy within women, where women in leadership, often unintentionally, uphold patriarchal norms by operating within the existing frameworks of male-dominated institutions. This dynamic adds another layer of complexity to the challenges faced by women in politics and is further explored as a significant barrier to women's political leadership in the fifth section.

To ensure that women can fully participate in the political process, there is an urgent need for not just legislative reforms but also for a fundamental shift in the internal structures of political parties. Without such systemic changes, the progress made by individual women in politics risks remaining the exception rather than the norm. As scholars such as Nivedita Menon and Anne Phillips have emphasized, achieving substantive equality for women in politics goes beyond legislative equality – it requires the active dismantling of societal and institutional barriers that impede women's political participation (Menon, 2002; Phillips, 1995).

The challenges faced by women in Indian politics, including the entrenched patriarchy within political parties and societal structures, are not unique to India. Across the world, women in politics encounter similar barriers, albeit shaped by the cultural, political, and institutional contexts of their respective countries. However, several nations have implemented effective policies and measures to bridge the gender gap in political representation. Examining these global practices offers valuable insights into strategies that can address India's representation gap. By analyzing how other parliaments have worked towards greater gender parity, we can identify lessons that might inform India's journey toward more inclusive governance.

COMPARISON WITH GLOBAL PARLIAMENTS

This section examines how the representation of women in India's Parliament compares to other countries, drawing on global data and scholarly analysis to highlight the challenges and potential ways for improvement.

The global representation of women in national parliaments paints a picture of stark contrasts across different nations. For example, Rwanda has achieved remarkable success, with women holding over

61% of parliamentary seats, followed by Cuba at 55.7%, Nicaragua at 53.9%, and Mexico at 50.4%. However, India sits far behind in this regard, ranked 148th globally, with only 13.6% female representation in its parliament (IPU, 2024). This disparity highlights not just a statistical difference but the deep-seated structural and cultural obstacles that women face in Indian politics. Countries like Rwanda owe much of their success to the adoption of gender quotas. Dahlerup [2006] notes that Rwanda's post-genocide constitution instituted a gender quota system requiring at least 30% female representation in all decision-making bodies, significantly transforming its political landscape. In contrast, India has not enacted such comprehensive legislative mandates and has instead pursued gradual, incremental changes, which have yet to produce comparable results Table 5.

Table 5.

Rank	Country	Seats	Women	%
1	Rwanda	80	49	61.3
2	Cuba	470	262	55.7
3	Nicaragua	91	49	53.9
4	Mexico	500	252	50.4
46	UK	650	226	34.8
55	Nepal	272	90	33.1
71	USA	429	126	29.4
137	Pakistan	309	50	16.2
148	India	543	74	13.6

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union

Countries such as Sweden and South Africa have achieved significant female representation (46% and 45%, respectively) without national quotas. Instead, they rely on party-based quotas, where political parties themselves adopt internal gender quotas to ensure better representation. Tripp and Kang [2008] argue that these party-based quotas can be even more effective in increasing women's political participation. Sweden's "zipper system" is a prime example, where men and women are alternated on the list of candidates, so if the first candidate is a man, the second is a woman, the third a man, and so on, ensuring gender balance (Krook, 2009).

In comparison, Indian political parties have been notably slow to implement measures promoting gender inclusivity. The ongoing challenges with passing the Women's Reservation Bill, alongside the significant underrepresentation of women in Parliament, illustrate the reluctance of political parties to prioritize gender equality. This reluctance is often linked to the emphasis on short-term electoral gains rather than genuine inclusivity. Such trends highlight that while legislative efforts remain essential, comprehensive internal reforms within political parties may be equally crucial in fostering sustainable and meaningful change in India's political framework.

Thus, the global comparison underscores a dual approach: legislative reform and internal party restructuring. While India's current framework highlights significant gaps, lessons from international practices reveal actionable strategies that can address these gaps effectively.

Policies and Measures

Strengthening the participation of women in national parliaments needs the implementation of comprehensive and wide-ranging policy strategies, as exemplified by successful instances worldwide. A number of nations have enacted laws and established party-based mechanisms to guarantee that women are not only included in politics but also actively participate in decision-making procedures.

Quotas Imposed by Legislation

Implementing legislative gender quotas has shown to be a highly successful strategy in enhancing the presence of women in parliaments. The post-genocide constitution of Rwanda, which explicitly

mandates the reservation of 30% of parliamentary seats for women, has played a crucial role in enabling the country to achieve the highest proportion of female parliamentarians globally. Presently, women occupy 61.3% of the seats (IPU, 2024) [7]. Remarkably, Senegal, and Uganda, among other African nations, have also implemented this approach, leading to considerable growth in female parliamentary representation.

Latin American nations such as Mexico and Bolivia have implemented gender parity legislation mandating political parties to nominate an equal number of male and female candidates. Mexico's parity legislation, enacted in 2014, has achieved notable success, resulting in women occupying 50.4% of seats in the national Parliament [8, 9]. These legislative mandates ensure that women have an equitable opportunity to be elected, thereby fostering a more inclusive political culture.

Political Party-Based Quotas

In nations such as Sweden and Norway, where there are no official legislative quotas, political parties have taken the responsibility of establishing internal gender quotas. The Social Democratic Party of Sweden, for instance, employs a "zipper system" on its party lists, alternating between male and female candidates. The implementation of this approach has played an important role in maintaining Sweden's unsurpassed 46% female participation in parliament [10]. The implementation of party-based quota allows for flexibility and adaptability across different election systems, ensuring gender parity in party nominations.

Another noteworthy example is South Africa, where the African National Congress (ANC) has voluntarily implemented a 50% quota for women in its party lists. As a result, the proportion of women present in South Africa's parliament stands at 45%, demonstrating the efficacy of robust party-level initiatives to achieve gender parity [11].

Electoral Reforms Program

Electoral processes can directly impact the extent of women's representation in parliaments. Nations implementing proportional representation (PR) systems generally exhibit greater levels of female representation in comparison to countries using the first-past-the-post (FPTP) systems. For example, with the implementation of legislative gender quotas in conjunction with PR systems, Spain has experienced substantial increases in women's representation. [12]

New Zealand presents a unique example where the transition from First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) to a mixed-member proportional (MMP) system in 1996 led to a significant rise in the representation of women in parliament. [13] The MMP system, integration of proportional representation with aspects of FPTP, allows for a more equitable allocation of seats, therefore enhancing the chances of being elected for women and minority groups.

Legislative and Organizational Changes

In addition to quotas and election systems, legislative, and institutional reforms are important to enhance women's representation. Reforms in Iceland, where women hold 47.6% of parliamentary seats, have focused particularly on the establishment of a work atmosphere that is family-friendly within the parliament (Gudmundsdottir, 2020). These changes encompass the implementation of flexible working hours, parental leave regulations, and childcare facilities, all of which facilitate the involvement of women in politics by achieving a balance between their professional and personal lives.

Furthermore, in nations such as France, the implementation of monetary penalties for political parties that do not meet gender balance criteria in their candidate lists has served as a strong motivation for parties to give priority to the representation of women. [14] Through the implementation of such policies, together with wider social transformations, France has successfully achieved a female representation rate of 39.5% in its National Assembly (Lang et al., 2023).

Cultural and Educational Endeavours

Cultural transformation is equally important in improving women's political representation. Public awareness campaigns and educational initiatives that question conventional gender norms and advocate for the significance of women's involvement in politics have achieved success in many nations. In Tunisia, following the Arab Spring, a sequence of national discussions and educational campaigns centered on gender equality resulted in the formulation of a new constitution that ensures gender equality in elected bodies. Consequently, Tunisia has had a consistent rise in the proportion of women present in its parliament, which now stands at 31.3% [15].

Furthermore, the implementation of mentoring and training programs for women candidates, as seen in Canada and Australia, has effectively encouraged women to pursue political careers and attain success. These programs provide women with skills training, networking opportunities, and support systems to assist them in navigating the frequently male-dominated political environment [16].

India's Standing and Lesson Learnt

Despite some progress, India lags behind many nations in terms of women's representation in politics. The Global Gender Gap Report 2023 ranks India 65th for political empowerment and 129th overall for gender equality. Neighboring countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal have surpassed India by implementing gender quotas and adopting inclusive policies.

Drawing from international examples, India can take inspiration from Rwanda's legislative quotas, Sweden's party-level reforms, and New Zealand's electoral system changes. Adopting these strategies, alongside measures tailored to India's socio-political context, such as implementing the long-delayed Women's Reservation Bill and introducing family-friendly parliamentary policies, could significantly enhance gender representation. However, structural reforms alone will not suffice. Continuous cultural shifts through education and awareness campaigns will also be crucial to dismantling the deeply entrenched stereotypes that hinder women's leadership roles. A holistic approach addressing both systemic and societal barriers is essential for India to move closer to achieving gender parity in politics.

BARRIERS TO POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

While several regions worldwide, including India, have achieved gender parity in voting, this impartiality in the electoral process has not resulted in equitable representation in legislative institutions. As previously discussed, India's Parliament continues to be male-dominated despite the growing influence of women as a voting demographic. This disparity gives rise to a crucial question about the impediments that hinder women from achieving equal positions in political leadership.

Psycho-Social Perceptions and Socio-Cultural Barriers

One significant barrier to women's political leadership is the far-flung socio-cultural and psycho-social attitudes that question women's ability in electoral decision-making, governing a state or nation, and forming laws. Societies where patriarchy dominates the social structure effectively integrate these perceptions that leadership is exclusive to men. Gender stereotypes have a psychological impact on the formation of public views about leadership. From a young age, both males and females are socialized into roles that are associated with conventional gender norms – males are often linked to attributes such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and leadership. In contrast, females are linked to nurturing, empathy, and kindness. These biased notions not only restrict the possibilities accessible to women but also form the perception of them by voters and party strategists. Existing research indicates that voters tend to consider male candidates as more capable of handling the issues pertaining to the economy, defence, and national security, whereas female candidates are generally allocated to delicate responsibilities such as healthcare, education, and welfare (Early & Karau, 2002; Ridgeway, 2001).

There exists a pervasive, often implicit assumption that women lack the resilience necessary to navigate the adversities of political leadership. This perception is reinforced by historical narratives and media portrayals that idealize male leaders while diminishing the achievements or reputations of female

leaders. Gender studies have extensively discussed this phenomenon of contradictory expectations. The issue of the "double bind" is pervasive, as female leaders often encounter criticism for being either excessively gentle or harsh, excessively emotional or excessively detached, regardless of their actual behaviour (Jamieson, 1995; Heilman, 2001).

Structural and Systemic Barrier

In addition to psycho-social barriers, the presence of structural and institutional challenges inside political institutions intensifies the difficulties experienced by women in political leadership. Political parties, as the primary guardians of political authority, traditionally exhibit a preference for male candidates in leadership roles, therefore sustaining a recurring pattern of male hegemony in the realm of politics. When women do indeed participate in politics, they are frequently assigned to less powerful positions or assigned portfolios that conform to conventional gender roles, therefore restricting their capacity to exert influence over crucial policy choices (Krook, 2010; Dahlerup, 2006).

Inherently, the voting system can present substantial obstacles to women's involvement in politics. In nations utilizing a first-past-the-post electoral system, such as India, the level of competition is typically intense, leading political parties to favour male candidates whom they believe have a higher likelihood of winning. Conversely, historical evidence has demonstrated that proportional representation systems are more advantageous for women's representation since they enable a broader spectrum of candidates to be elected (Rule, 1987; Reynolds, 1999).

The Pervasive Influence of Patriarchy

Patriarchy, as a deeply ingrained social system, manifests both externally in societal structures and internally within the attitudes and behaviours of women themselves, creating a significant barrier to women's political leadership.

Externally, patriarchal norms dominate societal perceptions of leadership, reinforcing the idea that leadership roles are inherently male. Societies with entrenched patriarchal structures often propagate gender stereotypes, where men are associated with qualities like assertiveness and decisiveness, while women are linked to nurturing and empathy. These stereotypes not only restrict opportunities for women but also shape voter preferences and party strategies. Research demonstrates that male candidates are often viewed as more competent in areas like the economy, defense, and national security, while women are assigned softer issues such as education and healthcare (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ridgeway, 2001).

Additionally, the "double bind" phenomenon creates contradictory expectations for women leaders. Women are frequently criticized for being either too emotional or too detached, too gentle or too harsh, making it nearly impossible for them to conform to societal expectations without facing backlash (Jamieson, 1995; Heilman, 2001). Gender-based violence, harassment, and discrimination also act as deterrents, dissuading women from pursuing political careers (Bardall, 2013; Htun & Weldon, 2010).

An equally significant but less explored phenomenon is patriarchy within women, where women, consciously or unconsciously, uphold patriarchal norms within male-dominated systems. Internally, patriarchal norms are often internalized by women, manifesting as a lack of solidarity among women leaders and voters. Women voters may unconsciously uphold patriarchal values, favouring male candidates as "natural" leaders due to long-standing social conditioning. This internalized patriarchy can diminish the chances of women being elected, even in constituencies with a high proportion of female voters.

Similarly, women in political leadership may replicate patriarchal behaviours, such as marginalizing other women or adhering to male-dominated power dynamics, rather than challenging these systems. For instance, in local governance systems, women elected under reservation policies, such as

sarpanches, have faced resistance from other women in their communities who question their legitimacy as leaders. This lack of collective empowerment undermines the effectiveness of women's representation and leadership. Patriarchy, both external and internal, therefore functions as a reinforcing cycle, perpetuating gender disparities in political leadership.

MORAL AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

It becomes evident that the underrepresentation of women in political leadership is not just a matter of statistics but could also be a serious moral and ethical issue. Previous sections have identified and discussed policy biases arising from gender inequalities in political representation, which either ignore or poorly address critical concerns of women on health disparities and gender-based violence. This section explores deeper moral and ethical issues arising from such gender inequalities. It also attempts to analyze how democratic institutions are bound by duty to ensure equal representation and how defaulting on equal representation constitutes systemic injustice. In exploring these ethical responsibilities, this section emphasizes how failing to achieve gender balance in political leadership not only compromises policy effectiveness but also sustains societal structures that limit equal participation, resulting in long-term implications for democratic health and social justice.

Examination of the Ethical Responsibilities of Democratic Institutions

Gender inequality in political representation fundamentally contradicts the democratic principles of equality, equity, and justice. As philosopher John Rawls [1971] argues in *A Theory of Justice*, a just society guarantees fair and equal opportunities to all, especially the most disadvantaged. Not only does excluding women from political power contradict this ideal, but it also calls into question the legitimacy of democratic institutions themselves. This view is echoed by Iris Marion Young [1990], who argues that a true democracy must include all social groups, including women, to fully represent society's diversity: "Democracy, inclusiveness, and participatory rights of all social groups, women included, must be represented with due voice in the decision-making process." Systematic exclusion of women leads to inherent flaws in the democratic process, as it fails to represent the spectrum of interests within the population fully.

Political theorist Anne Phillips [1995] argues that democracy should incorporate the representation of all individuals, including women, to ensure the crafting of policies that align with their needs and aspirations. Democratic institutions have an ethical role that goes beyond removing barriers to women's participation; it also involves amplifying the voices of women and ensuring their adequate representation. In this regard, Amartya Sen's concept of "substantive freedom" also contributes to the argument. In *Development as Freedom* [1999], Sen asserts that institutions should not only prevent interference (negative freedoms) but actively foster positive freedoms – opportunities for individuals to participate meaningfully in society. This includes civil and political rights that enable full engagement in public life.

From this standpoint, democratic structures have an ethical obligation to promote women's political participation, ensuring they have both the right and the practical means to influence decisions affecting their lives. As Sen suggests, the concept of liberty is incomplete without the freedom to actively participate in shaping society. Therefore, democracy must not only permit but actively encourage women's inclusion, making their presence a fundamental aspect of legitimate governance (Sen, 1999).

Moral Obligations: Discussion on the Moral Imperative to Address Gender Disparities

The moral responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality, and justice informs the issue of gender inequalities in political leadership. Martha Nussbaum [2000] has it that active political participation is a necessary part of the human capability required in order to attain human dignity. Nussbaum frequently emphasizes that women's exclusion from political leadership not only undermines their human equality with men but also jeopardizes justice for all. Simone de Beauvoir [1949] echoes this view, advocating for women's freedom and highlighting the absurdity of culture and structures that

have consistently oppressed women. Both analyses are similar in that they perceive the significance of the equality of political representation as an essential step that will make the concerned women's voices meaningful in the political scenario.

Furthering this debate, Nancy Fraser [2009] points out that justice entails not only fighting economic injustice but also dismantling cultural and institutional frameworks that discriminate against women. Fraser critiques traditional approaches that focus solely on economic redistribution, arguing that true justice in the political realm necessitates challenging the patriarchal norms that exclude women from leadership roles. This aligns with the assertions made by Young [1990] in her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, which focuses on the importance of identifying and affirming the minority, particularly women, within the democratic community and in decision-making processes. According to Young, the approach to becoming a democracy must involve the perspectives of women, who have often been marginalized by patriarchal power structures. Held [2006] contributes to the discussion by challenging traditional political ethics, which often prioritize abstract principles over relational and contextual considerations. Held argues that democratic institutions have a moral responsibility to care for all citizens, particularly those who have been historically marginalized, such as women. She posits that this responsibility includes ensuring that women have equal opportunities to participate in political leadership. Held's ethics of care offer a nuanced perspective that complements Fraser's focus on dismantling cultural and institutional barriers, as both emphasize the importance of creating a more inclusive and participatory democracy.

Catharine MacKinnon [1989] critically examines the ways in which legislative and political structures reinforce the subordination of women, asserting that these institutions not only fail to challenge but actively sustain gendered power imbalances. In her work *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, MacKinnon argues that meaningful reform cannot occur within the existing system because its frameworks and values inherently marginalize women. She advocates for a radical restructuring of these systems, not simply to include women but to empower them to redefine and transform these structures, making them responsive to women's perspectives and experiences. This critique aligns with Laurie Shrage's [1994] insights on liberal feminism's limitations. Shrage argues that liberal feminism, by seeking equality within existing power structures, often does not question the foundations of these structures or their embedded power relations. In *Moral Dilemmas of Feminism: Prostitution, Adultery, and Abortion*, Shrage and MacKinnon both emphasize the need for a foundational shift in political and legislative approaches to dismantle entrenched gender inequalities effectively. Their combined analyses suggest that without a fundamental challenge to the gendered nature of political and legislative systems, efforts toward gender equality risk reinforcing the very hierarchies they seek to oppose.

Analyzing the works of these feminist thinkers, it is possible to observe a rather diverse exchange of ideas on what moral and ethical precedents of democratic politics should undertake to achieve gender parity among the political elites. In general, Iris Marion Young [1990], Martha Nussbaum [2000], Nancy Fraser [2009], Simone de Beauvoir [1949], Virginia Held [2006], Catharine MacKinnon [1989], and Laurie Shrage [1994] have highlighted that achieving women's political leadership in a timely manner is not just a matter of numbers but also a moral imperative. These thinkers assert that the polity has deprived women of their rights, leading to injustice and undermining democracy. Through a meaningful interpretation of human dignity, equality, and justice, they underscore our democratic institutions' ethical imperative to ensure that not only do women occupy leadership positions but also work to dismantle the attitudes and practices that continue to subordinate women.

The discussion among these feminist philosophers highlights the moral imperative to address gender disparities in political leadership as a necessary step toward achieving a more just and equitable society. This requires a commitment to dismantling the systemic barriers that have historically excluded women from positions of power and to create a democratic system that genuinely reflects the diverse voices and interests of all citizens, regardless of gender.

Impact on Society: Analysis of the Broader Societal Implications of Gender Inequality in Politics

Political underrepresentation of women has wide ramifications for society. For instance, when conducting a study on the subject, Pippa Norris [2002] argued that having women in political leadership would lead to the adoption of more inclusive and equitable policy-making, given the fact that women are more inclined to champion issues pertaining to health, education, and social welfare. This directly affects the quality of governance and the well-being of its people. Further, the philosopher Carole Pateman [1988] has also noted that the exclusion of women from political power not only supports patriarchal structures but is also responsible for broader social inequalities affecting other opportunities available to women in education and employment. Gender inequality in political representation also has implications for the legitimacy of democratic institutions. As Jürgen Habermas [1996] says, democratic legitimacy relies on the active participation of all its citizens in the public sphere. The underrepresentation of women thus raises questions of legitimacy within the democratic process itself, as it denies every citizen equal opportunity to participate in public debate, which may undermine public trust in political institutions. Added to this, research by gender scholars, including Mona Lena Krook [2010], suggests that countries with higher levels of female representation have lower levels of corruption and more open government, implying that gender equality in politics can contribute to creating a just and ethical society.

The moral and ethical implications of gender inequality in political representation are vast, touching on basic issues of justice, equality, and democratic legitimacy. The key issue of such disparity is not only legislative or institutional reform but broad societal transformation, challenging the patriarchal norms and power structure keeping women out for so long. Democratic institutions will be fulfilling their ethical obligation of representation and service to all members of society when they start advancing the political leadership of women, thus contributing to a just and equitable world.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL IMPACT

This section examines the development, comprehension, and distribution of knowledge about women's political participation, emphasizing how these processes shape public opinion and affect policy outcomes. An epistemological viewpoint illustrates the origins and systems of knowledge production that shape gender and politics, highlighting the dominance of certain narratives while marginalizing others.

Knowledge Construction

The construction of knowledge about women's political participation is deeply embedded in historical and cultural contexts. Feminist academics such as Sandra Harding [1986] argue that knowledge is not impartial but rather influenced by power structures, particularly gender dynamics that dictate whose viewpoints are deemed important and whose are dismissed. Specifically in the political sphere, a patriarchal perspective often shapes the perception of women's roles, leading to a limited appreciation of their contributions and a downplaying of their political influence.

Politics discourse on gender roles has long been heavily shaped by the persistent impact of conventional male-dominated attitudes. The media plays a role in perpetuating these ideas by often prioritizing the personal lives of female politicians over their efforts to shape policies. The picture of renowned women leaders like Sonia Gandhi and Sushma Swaraj is characterized by a greater emphasis on their family or demeanour instead of their political achievements. Education also contributes to forming our understanding, separate from the media. Nivedita Menon [2012] brought attention to the fact that Indian textbooks often ignore or minimize the contributions made by women in political settings in her research. Generally, this approach perpetuates the belief that men primarily control the domain of politics. Such prejudiced educational content can shape generations' perspectives about the capabilities of women in leadership roles.

Public Discourse

The media, educational systems, and public dialogue disseminate knowledge and establish perceptions, making public discourse a significant factor in forming societal attitudes towards women

in politics. Researchers have extensively documented a phenomenon known as "symbolic annihilation," where the media either underrepresents or inaccurately portrays women, often disregarding or downplaying their contributions. Furthermore, political discourse frequently disregards women's concerns, perpetuating the notion that women are inferior leaders due to their under-representation.

However, the prevailing public discourse continues to reflect India's primary problem: an audacious patriarchal perspective. The discussions surrounding the Women's Reservation Bill have mostly focused on the perceived "competence" and "capability" of women to assume leadership roles rather than delving into the significant obstacles that hinder women's participation in legitimate political spheres. Therefore, these discussions have perpetuated the gender stereotype and undermined the potential of women in leadership positions.

Nevertheless, there are positive aspects regarding the evolving nature of public discourse. Feminist movements and thinkers, along with the growing number of women entering the political arena, are gradually dismantling these prejudices. Groups such as the All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) have led advocacy efforts that have significantly contributed to the presence of women in political institutions, reinforcing the notion that women are not only supporters but also competent leaders. The leadership of local panchayats, which primarily entrust women with the responsibility of executing initiatives related to education, health, and sanitation, serves as a notable illustration of this shift. Bina Agarwal's [2010] [7] study reveals that women-led panchayats emphasize policies and objectives pertaining to women and children, thereby highlighting the significance of women's involvement in decision-making roles.

Despite the positive developments at the panchayat level, the constant portrayal of women as traditional caregivers, homemakers, and subordinates to men perpetuates public scepticism regarding their qualifications for positions in politics, gender is a performative and socially created concept. Therefore, whenever the media and public discourse picture women in such restricted positions, it consistently strengthens the notion that they are inherently incompetent for leadership. The media portrayal of women leaders like Mamata Banerjee and Mayawati has so reflected this scepticism. Inquiries inevitably focus more on their personal lives or alleged emotional content than their contributions to policy discussions, despite their notable political achievements. The consequence of such gendered conceptualization is that it tends to reinforce preconceived notions and hence limits the acknowledgement of women's political effectiveness.

This reflects an ongoing issue in public debate that highlights the need for more involved and equal women in politics, with equal weight assigned to their contributions, a voice heard, and identical to their male counterparts. [8].

Policy Exclusion

The underrepresentation of women in key ministries, such as finance, defence, and home affairs, results in a biased emphasis on policies that may not sufficiently address the distinct obstacles faced by women. Budgetary allocations may inadvertently neglect gender-specific requirements, and defense plans may not adequately address the security concerns of women. In contrast, nations that have a greater proportion of women in parliament and important ministries have shown more inclusive strategies for policy formulation, especially in domains such as social welfare, health, and education. Rwanda is widely acknowledged as a prominent example of female representation, with women occupying more than 60% of seats in the lower chamber of parliament. The considerable degree of representation has resulted in the implementation of progressive policies, especially in the realm of social sectors. Rwanda, for instance, has successfully executed extensive healthcare changes that have produced substantial reductions in rates of maternal and infant mortality. In addition, the nation has made significant progress in the field of education, achieving gender equality in the number of students enrolled in primary and secondary schools (Burnet, 2011; Woolley, 2006) [9, 10].

The lack of female representation in political decision-making has a direct impact on the issues that receive priority in policy discussions [11]. With women underrepresented in leadership roles, critical issues that predominantly affect them, such as gender-based violence, maternal health, and workplace discrimination, often do not receive adequate attention [12, 13]. For example, according to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) 2021, crimes against women have continued to rise, with a total of 428,278 reported cases [14, 15]. Despite these troubling figures, there is often a lack of substantial legislative action, particularly in areas like law enforcement and legislative reform. In terms of health, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) from 2019–2021 highlights a concerning prevalence of malnutrition and anaemia among women, with 57% of women aged 15 to 49 affected [16, 17]. Furthermore, only 58% of women received the recommended four early prenatal care visits during pregnancy, pointing to systemic neglect of women's health issues [18, 19]. These statistics emphasize the ongoing gaps in policy focus on women's health, which could likely be addressed more effectively if women were more prominently involved in shaping health-related policies [20, 21].

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This research highlights the prominent gender inequalities in political representation in India, revealing the structural obstacles that hinder women from achieving equal positions of leadership. There has been a rise in female voter turnout and involvement at the local level. Still, this development has not resulted in equal representation for women in Parliament or important government roles. The democratic values of justice and equality are undermined by this incongruity, which results in policies that often ignore the different requirements and viewpoints of women.

Recommendations

- *Execution of the Women's Reservation Bill:* As the 106th Constitutional Amendment or Women's Reservation Bill is passed in 2023, its immediate implementation is imperative. To rectify the current gender disparity, it is recommended to establish a reserve of 50% until women's participation in Parliament and state legislatures reaches equality with males. The execution of this strategy affirms the improvement of democratic norms and a fair representation of women's perspectives in decision-making procedures.
- *Improved Female Inclusion in Cabinet Positions:* The present composition of the Indian Cabinet includes only two women out of 30 ministers, indicating a negligible representation of 6.6%. Considering the crucial role of Cabinet Ministers in formulating significant policies, the lack of female presence may result in biased policy-making and the exclusion of women's viewpoints in fundamental decisions. To establish a more balanced and inclusive governance system, it is imperative to guarantee that women hold an equitable portion of these posts, ideally striving for gender parity.
- *Quotas within Political Parties:* The implementation of internal quotas for women candidates inside political parties is a crucial measure for achieving gender equality. Parties can assist in the dismantling of the deeply ingrained biases that regard political leadership as a male prerogative by guaranteeing that a substantial number of women are fielded in viable constituencies. This effort will help to establish women's leadership as the standard in Indian politics.
- *Addressing Gender Barriers in Politics:* Various debates, discussions, gender sensitization programs, and educational initiatives can alleviate the female burden of inadequate household support, economic insecurity, family inequality, and the dual roles and responsibilities between politics and households, thereby enhancing women's representation in politics. Civil society organizations involved in the justice sector should facilitate such programs.
- *Learning international exemplary models:* Nations such as Rwanda and Sweden have established standards for the participation of women in politics, resulting in more comprehensive and efficient formulation of policies, especially in the areas of social welfare, health, and education. India may derive valuable insights from these nations by implementing similar approaches for ensuring the inclusion of women's perspectives in all aspects of government.

- *Public Awareness Campaigns:* The transformation of society's perceptions towards women in politics requires the implementation of coordinated public awareness initiatives on the right to political participation. Both governmental and non-governmental organizations should support these campaigns, which aim to dismantle stereotypes and encourage the electorate to view women as equally independent and competent leaders.
- *Enhanced Monitoring and Data Collection:* To effectively improve the representation and influence of women in politics, the Ministry of Women and Child Development should adopt a proactive approach by creating and cautiously overseeing leadership development initiatives suited specifically for women at every level of political participation. Regular data collection on women's participation in politics, along with analysis, will help identify gaps and track progress. Government-funded or organized training programs for women in politics should be continually monitored to ensure they are meeting their intended goals.
- *Soft Skills Training to Women Representatives:* There should be regular training on public speaking, leadership, and managerial skills, solving, and how to interact with the electorate. All women elected representatives should receive this training, along with panchayat women leaders who aspire to represent their communities in Parliament and state legislative bodies.
- *Budget allocation:* The government must allocate separate funds for social justice committees and organizations for organizing gender awareness programs, local political awareness programs or the training programs mentioned above. By giving these committees the autonomy to determine how funds are utilized, the government can foster more effective programs, ensuring that the funds directly contribute to empowering women in political participation.

Call for Action

It is important to acknowledge women as persons of equal status and eligible to engage fully in the political field. The exclusion of women from political leadership undermines democratic values such as justice, equality, and liberty, rendering them ineffective. The achievement of gender equality in political representation is not only a matter of justice but also crucial for the advancement of democracy in general. A truly democratic society must mirror the demographic makeup of its people, and this cannot be achieved if women are excluded from the exercise of authority. India finds itself at a critical juncture. Implementing these suggestions could significantly improve the representation of women in political institutions, thereby fostering a more fair and equitable social order. The Ministry of Women and Child Development, in collaboration with civil society, ought to promote these initiatives, assuring that women are not only active contributors but also significant figures in shaping the future course of the country. Through resolute measures, India has the potential to provide a worldwide model of how achieving gender equality in politics may enhance democracy and facilitate its efficient execution.

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