



From participation to power: Women in electoral politics

Manjeet Yadav

Research Scholar, Department of Continuing Education and Extension, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Abstract

The paper will analyse the history of women's involvement in electoral politics with special focus on the difference between their involvement and the extent to which they have substantive power in governance. Women are still underrepresented as lawmakers and as candidates in India and in the world at large, despite their percentage of the electorate making up close to half of the total electorate. The study examines socio-cultural, economic, and political factors that hamper women's political power, namely patriarchal rules, economic constraints, and discriminatory issues at a party level. The research assesses the role of women in policymaking and reinforces the social reforms through the study of historical trends, legislative acts, and the case studies of effective women leaders. Among the findings, it is important to note that participation has grown, but structural reforms, capacity-building, and support of society are needed to convert participation into actual power. The recommendations include empowering gender inclusivity political systems and encouraging the leadership of women at all levels.

Keywords: Women in politics, electoral participation, political power, gender inequality, policy leadership

Introduction

The involvement of women in electoral politics is an old tradition held as being the key to a self-sustaining and representative democracy. Women in the world have always found it hard to claim their political rights and have encountered several strong foundations of patriarchy, socio-cultural bias, and obstacles created by institutions (Chachane, 2025) [2]. In India, the political life of women started with the movement of independence, when the role of women activists was very important in the process of forming the dialogue. Since independence, as constitutional articles ensured that all people got equal rights out in the political arena, women have still not been successfully represented in legislative activities (Afzal, Ganga, Roy, & Thompson, 2025) [1]. Almost half of the electorate, women are still under-represented as candidates, legislators, and policymakers on the national and state levels. It is the difference between being a participant and a political power that shows a very important issue: it is not necessarily that voting or even running an election results in making a difference in decisions. Women are not easily allowed to climb to a leadership position by socio-economic factors, inaccessibility to party networks, financial setbacks, and social attitudes towards them. Nevertheless, in those places where women have taken over power, there are studies that reveal that these places have made substantial benchmarks in the decision-making process, including the enactment of gender sensitive laws, social welfare programs, and inclusive modes of governance. This paper aims to discuss women's political participation dynamics and the jeopardies that are encountered by women in their quest to transform participation into power, as well as the influence of female leaders on governance (Coman & Shair-Rosenfield, 2025) [3]. The study will utilize historical patterns, legislative interventions including the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, and case studies of other prominent women politicians in an effort to provide a holistic perspective on how women are becoming significant in electoral politics. This study highlights the reality that, as much as a lot of progress has been achieved in structural reforms, capacity-building, and facilitating society as a whole, there is still a

need to change the concept of political participation into actual empowerment and leadership.

Global and Indian Perspective on Women's Political Participation

The issue of women's involvement in politics has undergone great development across the world, though some discrepancies still exist in different geographical locations. In the world, women obtained voting rights at various times, with New Zealand being the first country to have universal female suffrage in 1893. In the 20th and 21st centuries, the roles of women in parliaments and local governments have been increasing slowly, and the advocacy of gender equality by international organizations, the United Nations, and the Inter-Parliamentary Union has significantly helped in that (Comer, Work, Mathewson, Cuthbertson, & Machin, 2021) [4]. The example of countries such as Rwanda, Sweden, and Finland can be observed, where they have high female representation, which is facilitated by quotas, progressive policies, and heartening socio-political cultures, showing the favourable effect of the institutional interventions. Nevertheless, in most areas, the conventional patriarchal practices, gender stereotypes, and structural constraints still constrain the political power of women. Historical factors, social factors, and legislative factors have influenced women's participation in politics in India. Women were very important in the struggle for freedom, mobilizing societies and acting in nationalistic movements (Conway, 2001) [5]. After independence, the Indian Constitution ensured political rights were equal between women, but they did not have a high representation in parliament. With the history of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment in the 1990s offering 33 percent of reservation quota of women in Panchayati Raj institutions and urban local bodies, the history of departmental empowerment at the grassroots was turning into a paradigm shift. In spite of these provisions, women comprise about 14 percent of the Lok Sabha and 11 percent of the state legislatures, which is indicative of endemic limitations during party politics, nomination, and socio-economic limitations. In general, as both the global and Indian experiences demonstrate, we can see slow but

steady improvements in women's involvement in the political sphere; still, there is a gap between participation and power (Coffee & Bolzendahl, 2010). Recent developments have highlighted the necessity of structural changes, capacity-building exercises, and social assistance in order to be able to guarantee that a woman is not only present but is able to shape the decision-making and governance.

Historical Context of Women's Political Struggle

The campaign for women's political rights has been protracted and multiplexed, as it entailed suffrage campaigns, feminist movements, and social reform campaigns. The feminist movement of suffrage originated globally in the 19th century when the female population demanded the right to vote as well as to have the same political rights as men. Other milestones are the suffrage of women in New Zealand in 1893 and in numerous Western countries in the early 20th century, leading to universal female suffrage in the years after World War I and II (Goyal, 2023) ^[7]. The movements were also directly related to social reforms on a large scale, education, labour rights, and legal equality, which have formed the basis of modern feminist movements that are still fighting gender inequality in politics and governance. Women's political activism in India started during the colonial period and was joined with the nationalistic struggle. Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, and Kasturba Gandhi were some of the leaders who mobilized women towards social reform and towards the independence movement, and focused their attention on civic engagement as well as political representation. In 1935, the Indian suffrage movement scored a first when the Government of India Act allowed women to have restricted voting rights. In the post-independent country, the Constitution of India secured universal adult suffrage, which provided women with the right to vote and to challenge elections without limitation (Jarwal, 2025) ^[8]. Some of the significant developments that propelled the progress of the Indian woman were related to the election of the first woman Member of Parliament in 1952, the appointment of the first woman Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, in 1966, and the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in the 1990s, which required women to have one-third representation in the local government (Karki, 2023) ^[9]. These movements and milestones all over the world and within the nation demonstrate the gradual but constant process of the realization of recognition of political rights to their real involvement. They also emphasise that, as necessary as legal considerations are, social acceptance, empowerment, and proactive advocacy are also needed so that women can transform participation into political power.

Gender Disparity in Political Representation

Although immense improvements have been made in women's political representation throughout the world, there has always been a gender gap in political representation. Most women make up almost 50 percent of the global population, and this figure includes only 26 percent of the world's parliament seats, as indicated by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2025). This difference is a manifestation of structural, socio-cultural, and institutional factors that do not allow women to assume seats of power (Lee, 2022) ^[10]. Women have little or no encouragement to join politics or expressions by a given society against women in a political career or against female candidates.

Also, the political parties often prefer male candidates because of the existing network of connections, finances, and presumptions of electability, which also narrows the access of women to legislative roles. The gender gap in political representation is brought about, especially in India. Approximately 48 percent of the electorate are women; that perspective is reflected in the Lok Sabha representation, being about 14 percent, and in state houses, it is about 11 percent. Although the 33% quota granted to women under the 73rd and the 74th Constitutional Amendment has led to the improvement of the local form of governance, women are yet to attain proportional representation in the state and the nation. This imbalance is caused by factors like inadequate access to campaign resources, family commitments, political violence, and human attitudes within society. The effects of gender inequality in politics are heavy. There may be a lack of policies to meet the specific needs of women in their health, education, safety, and working cases, and end up in a democratic deficit (Kumar, 2023). Furthermore, the inadequate level of female representation undermines the variety of views during the policy-making process and supports accountability infrastructure. To eliminate such disparity, it is necessary to adopt holistic solutions to such a disparity, which include legislative quotas at elevated levels, political training, capacity-building initiatives, and social education to defy the stereotypes of women and their leadership. Democracy can only be truly inclusive and equitable when a gap is closed between the proportion of the population and their representation in politics.

Women's Participation in Electoral Politics

The entry of women in political voting is at various levels of participation, both as voters, candidates, and legislators, but there is still much ground to cover in bringing them into power. Women as voters have been exercising their franchise in greater degrees over decades, and women's voter turnout in India has been steadily increasing over the decades, reaching about 45 percent in the initial general elections of 1951-52 to about 67 percent in the Lok Sabha elections held in 2019. The socio-economic status, education, access to political information, cultural norms, and mobilization by political parties and civil society organizations are some of the factors affecting women's vote. Women have a tendency to focus on matters that touch on human factors, such as healthcare, education, and social welfare, and influence election results in significant ways. Women are still underrepresented as candidates, though. Women in the 2019 general elections were represented by the ratio of some 12 percent, which is the manifestation of the still existing gender bias in the nomination process preceding the party and the attitude associated with patriarchy, as well as access to the party's financial resources and political network. Party-level dynamics, such as informal selection procedures and favoring the male candidate, also limit the chances of women to challenge the seats that can be won. Even after they are elected, women's representation in the legislatures remains less than the proportional size of their population. Although such landmark steps as the first woman Member of Parliament, the first woman Chief Minister, and the 33% quota in Panchayati Raj institutions have improved the representation of women at local levels, today, women have no more than around 14% seats in the Lok Sabha and 11% places in state assemblies. A comparison between the

individual states reveals that there are differences in the number of females participating, with the southern states, such as Kerala and Karnataka, relatively more active and supported by local movements and parties in their participation, whereas the northern and northeastern states usually perform poorly. All in all, even though women have now become stronger as voters, structural, socio-economic, and political barriers still stand in their way on their way to becoming candidates and legislators, which is why there is still a gap between electoral participation and political power (Pansardi & Pinto, 2024) ^[12].

As Voters

Women voters have gradually been increasing in number, an indication of their political awakening and empowerment. During the first general elections in 1951-52, the voter turnout of women in India was about 45 percent, as compared to that of men, which is considerably lower. This has been reduced over the years, with women continuously showing higher participation levels, just like males. During the Lok Sabha elections 2019, women turned out to be approximately 67 percent, which shows that the mobilization and engagement have shown a constructive movement (Singh, 2024) ^[14]. The same trends are seen around the world: such nations as Sweden or Canada boast identical numbers between men and women voting, whereas in many third-world states, socio-economic and cultural factors are still trapping their women voters. There are a number of considerations in the voting by women. Literacy and education are essential, since educated women have more chances of attentively knowing political matters and playing their part. Economic freedom and urbanization further enhance voter participation, and traditional social structures, caste, and classes affect the ability of women to make political decisions, especially in rural regions. Women are most likely to care about healthcare, education, security, and social issues of concern, and this affects the local as well as national elections (Singh & Singh, 2024) ^[14]. In addition, parties' mobilization, awareness, and specific outreach programs have helped to increase the voter turnout of women. Regardless of the advances, there are still issues, such as political illiteracy among marginalized communities, inappropriate access to voting points, and other social traditions that prevent most people (socially unimportant) from making their independent political choice. Positively, it has been observed that with an increased number of women coming out to vote, their preferences are slowly becoming electoral agendas, and this is an indication that women can have their voices heard not just as voters but as policy makers. The persistent attempts at countering these socio-economic and cultural obstacles are critical in changing the voting engagement into substantive political action.

As Candidates

The percentage of women who have been elected into office as candidates is low, given that they occupy the majority in the voting force. India's 2019 general elections saw a mere 12 percent of women candidates of the Lok Sabha, a slight increase from previous decades, but still below the proportional representation. The state level has various percentages of female candidates depending on the regions; this is usually because of local socio-cultural beliefs and political campaign priorities. The gap between the male and female candidates signifies a barrier in the political party

and electoral system. One of the factors that hinders the candidacy of women is their party's nomination procedures. Political parties tend to select men to fill the open (winnable) seats, in terms of electability, experience, or financial strength. Women are more often assigned to lesser constituency seats or symbolic posts, making them less likely to be elected (Chachane, 2025) ^[2]. There are also internal party networks, which are dominated by men, which affects how the future candidates are selected, mentorship, and campaign support; hence, a woman cannot easily build a political career. There are also economic limitations that prevent women from taking part as candidates. Aggressive campaigns are very expensive, and most women simply cannot afford a campaign because of inequalities in earnings, lack of accessibility to loans, and reliance on their male relatives (Conway, 2001) ^[5]. Women may also be discouraged from running for office because of cultural demands and societal pressure, especially in rural setups. Nonetheless, through such challenges, women who take on the battle tend to do well in elections because they are strong in performance and leadership skills. Examples at the national and local level have shown that women can achieve higher candidacy rates when supported, trained, and given affirmative action, and this has narrowed the candidate-voter participation gap in political representation.

Women in Legislative Assemblies and Parliament

The presence of women in the legislative bodies has been increasing at a steady rate, so that the number of female representatives is not equal to the number of women in the population. India had seen a woman Member of Parliament in 1952, and with time, other women have taken their place, holding some important posts, and these include the prime minister, chief ministers, as well as cabinet ministers. At present, women are holding about 14 percent of seats in the Lok Sabha and about 11 percent of seats in the state legislature and assembly, much less than the one-third ratio that would be ideal in terms of fair representation. The 33% quota of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which empowers women in Panchayati Raj and urban local governments, has been more favourable to local government. Intra-state comparative analysis indicates a major difference (Karki, 2023) ^[9]. Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu count as the southern states with greater female representation in the legislative assemblies, which is promoted by grassroots mobilization, social reforms, and political awareness. The contrasting states are northern and northeastern states, where the participation rate is low because of patriarchal values, restricted political mobilization, and bias within the parties. There is also an unequal representation of women in different political parties, with some parties actively encouraging women candidates, and other political parties have a lavish spread of women candidates that are usually in less competitive constituencies. Incremental milestones encompass historical landmarks: Indira Gandhi became the first female Prime Minister in 1966; in state politics, Mayawati, Mamata Banerjee, and Sheila Dikshit have been women in the limelight of policymaking. Comparisons between the countries show that more effective quota systems and favourable policies, as in the cases of Rwanda and Sweden, produce increased female representation in the countries, and lead to more gender sensitive policymaking (Lee, 2022) ^[10]. Although women in India have recorded significant progress in the local context, they are underrepresented in

the upper ranks of the legislative process, which highlights the presence of socio-cultural, economic, and institutional obstacles that need to be addressed by introducing reforms that would then translate the presence of women in legislative bodies into real political power.

Barriers to Women's Political Power

Even though there is a constitutional protection and women are entering the electoral political arena in greater numbers, women still encounter several obstacles that restrain their influence in politics. One of the major obstacles is still the socio-cultural barriers. Strict gender roles, the entrenched patriarchal culture, and social conventions usually make women inactive in political careers. Women are often pressured to focus on family life more than on being a citizen, and the stereotypes of gender depict politics as a male sector, decreasing the level of social approval of women leaders. This is also enhanced by economic barriers. Electoral campaigns require a lot of finances, and many women do not have enough finances because of the disparity in their income, access to property or wealth, and the reliance of their moneyed support on their male relatives. This curtails their chances of competing with male contestants equally on an election front (Kumar, 2023). Obstacles such as political ones still exist. Male networks dominate the nominations, strategic choices, and mentorship in India and other countries that dominate party politics. Women are usually discriminated against during candidate selection, assignment to winnable constituencies, and exposure to party leadership roles, thus limiting their career advancement. These problems are aggravated by structural and institutional barriers. Local governments have seen positive effects of gender quotas, but more advanced legislatures are not always accommodated, and electoral regulations do not do a lot to encourage the parties to nominate women. Also, women are prevented by political violence, intimidation, and insecurity from being actively involved in politics (Pansardi & Pinto, 2024) ^[12]. All these socio-cultural, economic, political, and institutional hiccups can be seen as a multi-level obstacle in the pathway of accumulating power that women have to deal with. These issues should be overcome with a mix of legislative changes, capacity-building, and financial and societal changes that enable women not only to take part but to have a meaningful input in policy-making and governance.

From Participation to Power

The participation in political power is best explained by referring to the lives of successful women leaders, not only in India but also throughout the world. Women in India have also been very successful legislators as Members of Parliament, legislative assemblies, Chief Ministers, and grassroots leaders in Panchayati Raj institutions. The women leaders like Indira Gandhi, the first female Prime Minister, and Mamtata Banerjee, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, have shown the ability of women to use decision-making authority even at the highest positions. The women at the state and local level, such as Sheila Diksty in Delhi and many elected officials in rural Panchayats, have launched projects of development, social welfare, and women's community empowerment, among others, proving that leadership is not just about representation (Goyal, 2023) ^[7]. These case studies show the transformational powers of women in government because, in most instances, they show interests in policies regarding education, health,

gender equity, and social justice. Women's leadership has also brought changes in legislation and social reforms. Women legislators have been at the forefront of bringing legislation on domestic violence, maternity benefits, and women's safety, and grassroots leaders have organized communities on the need to enhance literacy, sanitation, and the general health of the people. These efforts demonstrate the fact that women leaders tend to introduce an inclusive and gender-sensitive approach to governance. These lessons are supported by comparative world examples. The examples of Sweden, Rwanda, and Finland that make women highly represented due to quotas and supportive political structures show that the presence of women results in progressive policy, equal distribution of resources, and participation in the government. Rwanda, as an example, boasts the highest percentage of women in parliament in the world, which has meant that the country advocates social welfare and women's rights (Jarwal, 2025) ^[8]. The policies of gender equality in Sweden are long-term, which draws attention to the fact that with systematic support, women can affect the decision-making process successfully.

Strategies for Enhancing Women's Political Power

The solution to political empowerment of women has to be multi-pronged, covering structural, social, and individual barriers. Policymaking is very influential in ensuring that women in politics have an enabling environment. The reservation quotas as seen in local governments (33 percent required under the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in India) have proven to be an effective structural intervention to quota women a higher level of representation. The provision of these gender-sensitive reforms in the state and national legislatures, and the imposition of party-level obligations of nominating women candidates to run in winnable constituencies, can also enhance the political power of women (Karki, 2023) ^[9]. Also, institutional obstacles can be decreased through reforms in electoral procedures, financing support of campaigns, and law protection against harassment. Capacity-building programs are also important in providing women with the skills and confidence needed in political leadership. Women are equipped with electoral practices, oratory, formation of policies, management of the campaigns through political training programs, leadership workshops, and mentoring networks. The mentorship of women leaders at the grassroots, especially rural women, enables them to negotiate the political systems, interact with communities, and wield some power in decision-making organs. Social awareness and advocacy based on the policy and capacity-building measures will help in countering deep-rooted stereotypes and cultural acceptance of women leaders (Lee, 2022) ^[10]. A favourable environment can be created by using media campaigns to encourage the success of women politicians and civic education programs, motivating women towards political participation and mobilization programs at the grassroots level. Both discussions on gender equality and the involvement of men and communities in advocacy can also achieve attitudinal change in society and motivate women to join various levels. A combination of these measures, policy reforms, capacity-building, and social advocacy can help overcome the participation and power gap. Through its institutional reinforcement, skills building, and changing the society, women would no longer be satisfied with token representation, but they would have substantial influence

that will shape how governance, policy priorities, and the democratic landscape are made.

Conclusion

This paper brings out the intricate history of the women in electoral politics that has seen them work their way through engagement to actual political authority. The discussion shows that although over the decades, the number of women participating in voting has been on the rise, they are underrepresented as candidates and legislators, and this situation is particularly true in India as well as the rest of the world. Women still cannot achieve decision-making positions due to socio-cultural norms, economic barriers, political discrimination, and structural barriers, which lead to a gap between participation and influence. Examples of some of the most successful women leaders in India, including Indira Gandhi, Mamata Banerjee, and the representatives of the Panchayat (at the grassroots level), have served to illustrate that given a chance and the support, women are capable of influencing a lot in the way governance, the policy agenda, and social reforms are made. The comparative examples with such examples as Rwanda or Sweden also testify that political participation is crucial to transforming into real power with the help of structural support, the inclusion of policies, and the acceptance of society. The results propose that legal factors, including the quota of reservations at local levels, are effective in improving the representation, but these aspects cannot offer fair political influence. Women need to be supported by building capacity to ensure that they are mentees, providing them with financial support, and addressing political threats. Social advocacy, media campaigns, and civic education are also very important in confronting the stereotypes and democratic acceptance of women leaders within society. The logic of addressing this issue to empower women in the electoral politics is to expand gender quotas to the higher levels of legislature, where elections are held, the party nomination process is more inclusive, and the development of leadership programs is more rampant. There is still a need to conduct more research on the overlap between caste, class, and regional factors in women's empowerment in politics and the long-term effects of women-led political systems on policy outcomes. To sum up, it is essential to close the divide between participation and power and use a holistic approach that involves legal, social, and institutional strategies. It is only at this stage that women can stop being represented symbolically so that they can have real power to influence democratic governance.

Reference

1. Afzal MHB, Ganga PD, Roy O, Thompson K. Navigating through educational pathways to political participation: A multi-theoretical exploration of voting behaviors. *arXiv.org*, 2025. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2504.20085>
2. Chachane H. Gender and power: Women's representation in electoral politics. *International Journal of Research -GRANTHAALAYAH*, 2025, 13(6). <https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i6.2025.6442>
3. Coman E, Shair-Rosenfield S. Women on the ballot and women at the polls: How women's representation shapes voter turnout in local elections. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 2025;13(4):1008–1024. <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2025.2>
4. Comer J, Work S, Mathewson KW, Cuthbertson L, Machin K. #ContextMatters: Advantages and limitations of using machine learning to support women in politics. *arXiv.org*, 2021. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2110.0116?>
5. Conway MM. Women and political participation. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 2001;34(2):231–233. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1350210>
6. Coffé H, Bolzendahl C. Same game, different rules? Gender differences in political participation. *Sex Roles*, 2010;62(5–6):318–333. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-009-9729-y>
7. Goyal T. Representation from below: How women's grassroots party activism promotes equal political participation. *American Political Science Review*, 2023;118(3):1415–1430. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055423000953>
8. Jarwal N. Electoral engagement and political representation: An analytical study of women's participation in India. *STM Journals*, 2025. <https://journals.stmjournals.com/article/article%3D2025/view%3D233702/?>
9. Karki TK. Women's representation in politics: An analysis of South Asian countries, 2023. https://lawjournals.celnet.in/index.php/jhrlp/article/view/1347?utm_source=chatgpt.com
10. Lee J. The virtuous circle of participation: Female candidates and women's engagement in Korean politics. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 2022;92:102576. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2022.102576>
11. Suresh Kumar MN. Women in politics: A comparative analysis of representation in India. *ShodhKosh Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 2023, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i2.2023.4002>
12. Pansardi P, Pinto L. What makes political parties to elect more women? A cross-country comparison. *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 2024, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2024.2423576>
13. Siingh S. Female political participation in India. *Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches in Allied Education*, 2024;21(5):255–262. <https://doi.org/10.29070/cqj4sx18>
14. Singh SS, Singh AP. Women representation in Indian politics. *ShodhKosh Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 2024, 5(5). <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i5.2024.4057>