


Chapter 16

Gender Equity for Women in Political Leadership in India

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ABSTRACT

Women's political participation is vital for democratic inclusivity, yet in India, systemic barriers hinder their representation. Despite constitutional provisions, women hold only 14.36% of Lok Sabha seats and face challenges such as party bias, financial constraints, gender stereotypes, and violence. Institutional resistance limits women's nominations, while patriarchal norms and media bias further marginalize them. However, breakthroughs like the 73rd and 74th Amendments (1992) and the Women's Reservation Bill (2023) have improved representation. Digital activism has also enabled women politicians to bypass traditional barriers. Despite progress, achieving gender parity in Indian politics requires stronger party quotas, financial aid, mentorship, and protections against violence. This chapter critically analyzes these barriers and breakthroughs, offering data-driven insights to foster inclusive governance.

INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in politics is an essential marker of democratic inclusivity and societal progress. The presence of women in governance contributes to more diverse policymaking, addressing issues related to gender equality, social welfare, and economic development (Krook & O'Brien, 2019). However, in India, despite

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constitutional guarantees and legislative efforts, the political sphere remains a male-dominated space where women encounter multiple systemic barriers. While India has witnessed some landmark breakthroughs in terms of legal reforms and increased representation at local governance levels, the broader landscape of national and state-level politics continues to reflect gender disparities.

According to data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2021), women's representation in national legislatures across the world has steadily increased, with a global average of 26.5%. However, India lags behind significantly, with women occupying only 14.36% of the seats in the 17th Lok Sabha (2019–2024) (Election Commission of India, 2020). This figure, though an improvement from previous years, remains one of the lowest among major democracies. At the Rajya Sabha (Upper House) level, women's representation is even lower, at approximately 11%. State legislatures also show stark variations, with some states like West Bengal and Bihar achieving relatively higher representation, while others continue to underrepresent women.

At the grassroots level, however, India has made significant strides. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992) mandated 33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), which has led to an estimated 1.3 million elected women representatives at the local government level (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2021). Some states, such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Odisha, have even increased this quota to 50%, leading to greater women's participation in decision-making at the village level. However, despite these progressive measures, many of these women serve as "proxy representatives," with male family members exerting control over decision-making processes (Sharma & Bhatt, 2019).

The barriers that hinder women's full participation in politics are multi-dimensional. Institutional challenges, such as political party biases, lack of gender-responsive frameworks, and financial constraints, restrict women's ability to contest elections and sustain political careers. Political parties in India are hesitant to nominate women candidates, often citing their lower "winnability" compared to male candidates. Data suggests that, on average, women receive only 9–12% of party nominations at the national level (Chowdhury, 2022).

Beyond institutional hurdles, socio-cultural factors remain a major deterrent. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes discourage women from pursuing political careers. Even when women enter politics, they are often confined to "soft" portfolios such as education, women and child development, and social justice, while critical portfolios like finance, defense, and home affairs remain male-dominated (Basu & Sen, 2021). Furthermore, violence against women in politics (VAWP) is a growing concern, with many women facing online abuse, character assassination, and even physical threats (National Crime Records Bureau, 2022). Economic constraints also play a significant role in limiting women's political participation. Election campaigns in India are expensive, requiring substantial financial backing,

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