



# Women's Representation in Indian Parliament and State Legislatures (Current statistics and challenges)

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## Abstract

Women's representation in political institutions is critical for achieving gender equality and inclusive governance. Despite making up nearly half of India's population, women's presence in Parliament and State Legislatures remains disproportionately low. Currently, women occupy only 15.1% of the seats in the Lok Sabha and 14.4% in the Rajya Sabha. At the state level, women's representation averages around 9%, with some states showing progress due to reservation policies. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act has been a success story, ensuring 33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, resulting in over 46% female representation in local governance. However, systemic challenges such as patriarchal norms, economic barriers, lack of political will, violence, and inadequate support systems persist, limiting women's political participation. This paper delves into these issues, providing a comprehensive analysis of the barriers women face in politics and offering actionable recommendations to enhance their representation. By addressing these challenges through legislative reforms, capacity-building initiatives, and fostering an inclusive political culture, India can move closer to achieving gender parity in governance.

**Keywords:** *Women's political representation. Women in Indian Parliament, State Legislatures, Panchayati Raj Institutions, Women in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha*

## Introduction

India, the world's largest democracy, prides itself on its commitment to gender equality and social justice. Yet, when it comes to women's representation in politics, the nation's progress remains uneven and inadequate. Women make up nearly 50% of India's population, but their political representation lags far behind this

demographic reality. The under representation of women in Parliament and State Legislatures highlights a significant gap in India's democratic framework, which aspires to be inclusive and representative.

This disparity is not merely a numerical imbalance; it has far-reaching implications for policymaking and governance. Women's participation in legislative bodies brings diverse perspectives, enriches debates, and ensures that laws and policies are more inclusive and equitable. Yet, systemic barriers continue to hinder their full participation in the political sphere. From deeply entrenched patriarchal norms to structural issues within political parties, women face a multitude of challenges that prevent them from assuming leadership roles in governance.

This paper seeks to address these critical issues by examining the current status of women's political representation in India, with a focus on Parliament and State Legislatures. It explores the progress made thus far, identifies persistent challenges, and proposes actionable solutions to bridge the gender gap in political participation. By delving into these aspects, the paper underscores the urgent need for reforms and initiatives to ensure that women's voices are adequately represented in India's decision-making processes.

## 1. Current Statistics

### 1.1 Women in the Indian Parliament

As of 2024, women constitute approximately **15.1%** of the Lok Sabha (lower house of Parliament) and **14.4%** of the Rajya Sabha (upper house of Parliament). Despite being the largest democracy in the world, India ranks 144th globally in terms of women's representation in national parliaments (Inter-Parliamentary Union data). Comparatively, countries like Rwanda (61.3%) and Sweden (47%) have demonstrated the potential of gender-focused policies to ensure better representation.

In the recent Lok Sabha elections, only 78 women were elected out of 543 members. While this marks an increase from previous years, the pace of progress remains slow. The Rajya Sabha has seen similar trends, with women holding only 31 seats out of 238 members. These numbers highlight the need for systemic reforms to promote gender parity at the national level.

### 1.2 Women in State Legislatures

The representation of women in State Legislative Assemblies varies widely, with an average of only **9%** across states. Some states, such as Bihar, Rajasthan, and Odisha, have made notable progress due to proactive measures like reservation policies and targeted campaigns. For instance:

- **Bihar:** Women's representation stands at **14.5%**, boosted by initiatives such as the 50% reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions.

- **Rajasthan:** With **13.2%** women in the state assembly, Rajasthan has consistently encouraged female participation through awareness programs.
- **Kerala:** Despite being a leader in social development indicators, women's representation remains low at **6.9%**, underscoring the disconnect between education and political empowerment.

In contrast, states like Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal have struggled to cross even 8%, reflecting the uneven adoption of gender-focused policies across the country.

### ***1.3 Panchayati Raj Institutions***

The **73rd Constitutional Amendment Act** (1992) mandated a minimum of **33% reservation** for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, a milestone in India's journey toward gender-inclusive governance. This quota has since been increased to **50%** in several states, resulting in remarkable outcomes:

- Women now constitute over **46%** of elected representatives in local governance bodies.
- States like **Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh** have witnessed women taking leadership roles as sarpanches (village heads), transforming grassroots politics.
- Studies indicate that women-led Panchayats have prioritized issues like education, healthcare, and water management, showcasing the positive impact of their participation.

While these achievements highlight the potential of affirmative action, challenges persist. Many women in Panchayati Raj Institutions face proxy representation, where male family members exert control over decision-making. Addressing these issues is critical to ensuring genuine empowerment.

## **2. Challenges to Women's Political Representation**

### ***2.1. Cultural and Social Barriers***

Women in India face deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that discourage them from entering politics. These cultural attitudes perpetuate the notion that leadership roles are better suited for men, while women are confined to traditional domestic responsibilities. Gender stereotypes, often reinforced by media and societal narratives, further undermine women's leadership capabilities, making it difficult for them to gain acceptance and credibility in the political arena.

### ***2.2. Economic Constraints***

Participating in politics requires significant financial resources, which many women lack due to systemic economic inequalities. Women often face limited access to independent sources of income and rely on male family members for financial support. This economic dependence restricts their ability to fund campaigns, hire teams, or compete effectively against financially empowered male candidates.

### ***2.3. Lack of Political Will***

The long-pending Women's Reservation Bill, which proposes 33% reservation for women in Parliament and State Legislatures, exemplifies the lack of political will to prioritize gender equality in governance. Despite being introduced in 1996, the bill has faced resistance from various political quarters, reflecting the reluctance of male-dominated legislatures to share power with women.

### ***2.4. Violence and Intimidation***

Women candidates often encounter violence, both physical and psychological, which serves as a deterrent to their active participation. Cases of harassment, threats, and even physical assault are not uncommon, particularly during election campaigns. Online abuse has emerged as a new form of intimidation, targeting women leaders with misogynistic and demeaning rhetoric.

### ***2.5. Inadequate Support Networks***

Unlike their male counterparts, women in politics often lack access to mentorship and support networks within political parties. The absence of women leaders in senior positions further exacerbates this issue, as younger women lack role models and guidance to navigate the challenges of political life. Party structures are often male-dominated, making it difficult for women to rise through the ranks.

### ***2.6. Systemic Issues in Political Parties***

Political parties play a crucial role in determining the level of women's representation, but most parties in India fail to prioritize gender diversity. Women are often fielded as candidates only in constituencies where the chances of winning are slim, reducing their overall representation. Internal party policies and practices seldom focus on creating a conducive environment for women to thrive.

## **3. Recommendations**

### ***3.1. Passage of the Women's Reservation Bill***

The swift passage of the Women's Reservation Bill is imperative to guarantee **33% reservation** for women in Parliament and State Legislatures. This legislative reform will institutionalize gender parity and serve as a foundational step toward addressing systemic imbalances in representation.

### ***3.2. Capacity-Building Programs***

- Launch comprehensive training programs to equip women with leadership, communication, and policy-making skills.

- Partner with civil society organizations to provide mentorship opportunities for aspiring women politicians.

### ***3.3. Economic Empowerment Initiatives***

- Create special financial schemes to support women candidates during elections, including subsidies for campaign expenses.
- Encourage political parties to establish internal funds dedicated to promoting women's participation.

### ***3.4. Strengthening Legal Protections***

- Implement stringent laws to curb violence and harassment against women in politics.
- Establish dedicated helplines and legal aid services for women leaders facing intimidation.

### ***3.5. Political Party Reforms***

- Introduce mandatory quotas for political parties to field at least **30-40% women candidates** in elections.
- Promote gender-sensitive policies within party structures to facilitate women's career progression.

### ***3.6. Leveraging Grassroots Success***

- Expand the reservation system to include leadership roles at state and national levels, building on the success of Panchayati Raj Institutions where women currently hold over 46% of the seats.
- Create platforms for women leaders in local governance to share their success stories, inspire others, and advocate for policy changes at higher levels of government.
- Provide capacity-building and exposure programs to help women representatives' transition from grassroots to state or national politics.

### ***3.7. Role of Media and Civil Society***

- Encourage media outlets to highlight the achievements of women leaders and challenge gender stereotypes through balanced and positive representation.
- Collaborate with civil society organizations to run awareness campaigns about the importance of women's political participation.
- Utilize digital platforms to amplify the voices of women leaders and counter online abuse and misinformation targeting female politicians.

## Conclusion

The representation of women in Indian Parliament and State Legislatures remains a crucial yet underdeveloped facet of the country's democratic framework. Despite the recognition of gender equality as a constitutional ideal and India's leadership in producing globally prominent women leaders, the proportion of women occupying seats in legislative bodies continues to be insufficient.

As of **2023**, women constitute approximately **15.2%** of the Lok Sabha and **14%** of the Rajya Sabha, which is significantly lower compared to the global average of **26.5%** (as reported by the Inter-Parliamentary Union). At the state level, women's representation varies widely, with states like West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha showing relatively higher participation, while many others lag behind with single-digit percentages. This disparity highlights structural and societal barriers that impede the entry and progression of women in political spaces. The current scenario reflects the persistence of socio-political and economic barriers that hinder women's active participation in governance. While some progress has been made over the years, achieving gender parity in political representation is still a distant goal.

### ➤ *Findings*

1. **Unequal Representation:** Women's representation in Indian legislatures is substantially lower than international standards and even compared to several developing nations.
2. **Socio-Cultural Hindrances:** Patriarchal norms and societal expectations discourage women from pursuing political careers.
3. **Political Party Reluctance:** Despite advocating for gender equality, political parties have been slow to nominate women candidates in winnable constituencies.
4. **Economic and Resource Barriers:** Women often lack the financial resources needed to contest elections effectively.
5. **Safety and Security Concerns:** The prevalence of violence, harassment, and unsafe environments deters women from participating in politics.
6. **Impact of Absence of Quotas:** The Women's Reservation Bill, which proposes reserving **33% of seats for women**, has not been passed, perpetuating the gender gap in representation.

### ➤ *Suggestions*

1. **Passing the Women's Reservation Bill:** The immediate passage of the long-pending Women's Reservation Bill will ensure a significant and mandatory increase in women's representation in legislatures.
2. **Encouraging Political Parties:** Parties must adopt internal policies to allocate a higher percentage of tickets to women candidates, backed by transparent accountability mechanisms.

3. **Capacity Building:** Training programs should be initiated to develop women leaders' skills in governance, public speaking, and election campaigning.
4. **Economic Support for Women Candidates:** Governments and civil society should establish financial support systems, such as campaign funding, to enable women to contest elections without economic barriers.
5. **Gender Sensitization in Politics:** Targeted initiatives should focus on changing the patriarchal mindset within political institutions and society to foster an environment supportive of women leaders.
6. **Role of Civil Society and Media:** Non-governmental organizations and the media should play an active role in promoting gender equality, highlighting women's contributions to politics, and advocating for structural change.official
7. **Ensuring Safety in Politics:** Policies and mechanisms to prevent harassment and violence against women in politics should be implemented, alongside legal and institutional safeguards.
8. **Mentorship Programs:** Experienced women politicians should mentor upcoming leaders to build confidence and provide strategic guidance.

### ➤ **Final Remarks**

Achieving gender equality in political representation is essential for India's progress as a vibrant democracy. Women's inclusion in decision-making processes brings diverse perspectives and fosters inclusive governance. Addressing the systemic and cultural barriers that restrict their political participation is not only a matter of justice but also critical for sustainable development. With concerted efforts from governments, political parties, civil society, and citizens, India can move toward a future where women have an equitable share of power in its legislative processes.

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