

Feminism and Political Representation in India

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Abstract— Feminism, as both a social movement and a political ideology, persistently challenges unequal power structures, patriarchy, and social exclusion. In India, the feminist movement is closely linked to the demand for equitable political representation and meaningful participation in governance. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, women remain significantly underrepresented in legislative bodies and political institutions. This study explores the evolution of feminism in India, examines the achievements and challenges in women's political participation, and evaluates ongoing efforts to enhance representation, such as gender-based reservations. Drawing on feminist theories and political analysis, the paper contends that genuine democratic inclusion in India requires dismantling patriarchal barriers and creating conditions for substantive female participation in decision-making.

Index Terms— Feminism; Women's Political Representation; Gender Equality; Indian Politics; Democracy.

INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of gender equality in politics cannot be separated from the broader feminist struggle. Feminism, both as an ideology and a socio-political practice, seeks to confront patriarchal norms that restrict women's rights, voices, and opportunities. It challenges the historically entrenched structures of male dominance that have shaped political institutions and decision-making processes. Within the Indian context, the feminist movement has not only fought for social and cultural recognition of women's rights but has also consistently demanded their rightful place in formal politics.

The Indian Constitution provides a strong normative framework for equality. Articles 14–16 guarantee equality before the law and equal protection of rights, while Article 15 specifically prohibits gender-based discrimination. In principle, these provisions commit the Indian state to ensuring equal participation of women in all spheres, including governance. However, the reality of women's political representation remains far from ideal, as structural barriers, cultural stereotypes, and institutional biases continue to hinder progress.

Women constitute nearly half of India's population, yet their presence in the corridors of political power is disproportionately low. In the 17th Lok Sabha (2019), women occupied approximately 14% of the seats—a historic high for India but still significantly below the global average of around 25–26% for national parliaments. At the state level, the picture is even more uneven, with several assemblies showing women's representation below 10%. This underrepresentation directly undermines the principle of inclusive and participatory democracy, as it restricts the diversity of perspectives in policymaking and limits the ability of governance structures to respond effectively to gender-specific concerns.

Situating women's political representation within the larger feminist discourse allows for a deeper understanding of how ideas, struggles, and activism around gender equality have shaped political demands in India. Feminist thought has consistently argued that without women's presence in decision-making bodies, democracy remains incomplete. It has further emphasized that political participation is not merely about numerical strength but also about substantive representation—ensuring that women's issues, rights, and aspirations are adequately addressed in policy agendas.

Debates around legislative reservations for women, especially the long-pending Women's Reservation Bill proposing 33% reservation in Parliament and State Assemblies, highlight the tension between constitutional ideals and political realities. While the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992–93) mandating one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and urban local bodies have created a new generation of grassroots women leaders, the same model has not been extended to higher levels of governance. Studies have shown that women representatives at the local level have brought fresh priorities to governance—such as education, healthcare, sanitation, and issues of everyday survival—demonstrating the positive impact of inclusive participation.

Nevertheless, barriers remain formidable. Women in politics often face structural disadvantages such as lack of access to party networks, limited financial resources for campaigning, gender-based violence, and the burden of balancing domestic responsibilities with public life. Social norms, media portrayals, and entrenched patriarchal attitudes also contribute to discouraging women's political participation. Additionally, tokenism and proxy representation—where women elected at the local level are often overshadowed by male relatives—pose further challenges to genuine empowerment.

This paper, therefore, situates the question of women's political representation within the broader feminist struggle in India. It seeks to analyze how feminist activism has shaped the discourse on equality in politics, how constitutional and legislative reforms have attempted to bridge the gender gap, and what structural and cultural barriers continue to persist. By doing so, it highlights the ongoing tension between constitutional promises of equality and the lived reality of women's exclusion from political power, while also exploring possible pathways towards achieving substantive gender equality in democratic governance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly research on feminism and political representation in India has focused on multiple dimensions:

1. **Feminist Theory and Representation:** Scholars like Iris Marion Young (1990) and Anne Phillips (1995) emphasize descriptive representation, arguing that women must be physically present in legislatures to ensure their perspectives shape political agendas.
2. **Indian Feminist Context:** Researchers such as Nivedita Menon (2004) and Sharmila Rege (2003) highlight the intersectionality of Indian feminism, noting that caste, class, and religion shape women's experiences in politics.

3. **Local Governance and Quotas:** Studies on the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992–93) indicate that reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions have created opportunities for women at the grassroots. Bina Agarwal (2001) observes that women elected to local councils have influenced policy priorities, particularly in education, health, and social welfare.
4. **Barriers and Challenges:** Research points to structural obstacles, including patriarchal norms, political violence, and limited access to financial and social networks, which impede women's political participation.

Overall, the literature indicates that while feminism in India has broadened debates on representation, meaningful inclusion of women in political decision-making remains a challenge.

FEMINISM AND WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN INDIA

1. **Historical Roots** - The historical roots of women's political participation in India can be traced back to the freedom struggle. Women were not passive observers; they actively engaged in nationalist movements, thereby simultaneously challenging colonial domination and entrenched patriarchal structures. Leaders such as Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and Aruna Asaf Ali emerged as symbols of courage and political agency, inspiring countless others to enter public life. Their involvement established the foundation for feminist thought in Indian politics, where political equality was tied to the broader struggle for national liberation. After independence in 1947, the Constitution of India enshrined principles of equality and non-discrimination (Articles 14–16) and guaranteed universal adult franchise. These provisions, in theory, provided women equal footing in political life. However, despite these guarantees, women's political representation remained minimal for decades. The persistence of patriarchal norms, limited access to political networks, and societal expectations restricted their presence in decision-making institutions.
2. **Legislative Representation** - Women in India have consistently demonstrated enthusiasm as voters. In fact, in recent elections, women's turnout has often equaled or even surpassed that of men, reflecting their growing political awareness and agency. Yet, this active participation as voters has not translated into proportional representation as legislators. In the 17th Lok Sabha (2019), women held only about 14% of seats, a record high for India but still far below the global average of around 25–26%. State assemblies often reflect even lower levels of representation. While India has witnessed exceptional women leaders—such as Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, President Pratibha Patil, and several women chief ministers—their cases remain exceptions rather than the norm. Overall, political power at the national and state levels continues to be concentrated in the hands of men.
3. **Local Governance Reforms** - A major breakthrough for women's representation came with the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992–93), which introduced one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and urban local bodies. This reform transformed the political landscape at the grassroots level, bringing millions of women into local governance structures for the first time in Indian history. Over time, several states—including Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh—went a step further and increased the quota to 50%, enabling women to occupy nearly half the seats in local bodies. Research indicates that women representatives at the local level often prioritize developmental and welfare issues, such as education, healthcare, drinking water, sanitation, and social security—areas closely tied to everyday life and community well-being. This shift in governance priorities demonstrates the substantive impact of women's participation, challenging the stereotype that women in politics merely act as “proxies” for male relatives.
4. **Women's Reservation Bill** - At the higher levels of governance, the Women's Reservation Bill has been the most debated reform. First introduced in 1996, the Bill proposes reserving 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies for women. Advocates argue that such a measure is necessary to correct historic imbalances and ensure a critical mass of women in legislative decision-making. They highlight the success of local-level quotas as evidence that reservation can empower women and transform governance. However, critics caution against potential pitfalls. Some fear that the reform could result in tokenism, with women being selected merely to fulfill quotas rather than as genuine leaders. Others argue it may lead to elite capture, where only women from politically influential families or upper castes gain entry, leaving marginalized women excluded. Despite decades of debate and multiple attempts in Parliament, the Bill has remained stalled—illustrating the deep resistance to restructuring India's political power balance.

CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and incremental reforms, women in India continue to face multiple challenges in accessing and exercising political power. These challenges are structural, cultural, and institutional, often intersecting with wider issues of caste, class, and religion. Some of the key barriers include:

1. **Patriarchal Norms** - Indian society remains deeply influenced by patriarchal traditions that associate politics with masculinity and public leadership with men. Women are often discouraged from entering politics, as they are expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities over public life. This cultural mindset perpetuates the belief that politics is a “dirty” or “unsafe” profession for women, thereby limiting their opportunities and aspirations.
2. **Violence and Intimidation** - Gender-based violence, both physical and psychological, is a significant deterrent to women's political participation. Women candidates and elected representatives often face harassment, threats, and even physical violence during elections and while in office. With the rise of social media, online abuse, trolling, and misogynistic attacks have become an additional challenge, discouraging women from taking leadership roles or expressing independent political opinions.
3. **Financial Constraints** - Electoral campaigns in India are highly resource-intensive, requiring substantial funding for outreach, mobilization, and publicity. Women generally have less access to financial resources, business networks, and party funding mechanisms compared to their male counterparts. This financial disadvantage severely restricts their ability to contest elections on an equal footing, often confining their participation to local-level bodies where costs are relatively lower.
4. **Intersectional Discrimination** - The challenges faced by women in politics are not uniform; they are compounded by caste, class, religion, and ethnicity. Dalit, Adivasi, OBC, and minority women often encounter double or triple marginalization—not only as women in a patriarchal society but also as members of socially and economically

disadvantaged groups. This intersectional discrimination limits their visibility in mainstream political spaces and makes their political journeys even more difficult compared to upper-caste or elite women.

5. **Tokenism in Local Bodies** - While the reservation system in Panchayati Raj Institutions has created opportunities for women, it has also revealed the problem of tokenism. In many cases, women are elected as representatives but act as “proxies” for male relatives, such as husbands or fathers-in-law, who exercise the real decision-making power. This phenomenon undermines the spirit of women’s empowerment, reducing their role to a symbolic presence rather than enabling substantive political agency.

CONCLUSION

Feminism in India has broadened the discourse on equality, highlighting the importance of women’s political participation for a truly democratic society. While quotas in local governance have improved grassroots representation, higher legislative bodies remain predominantly male. Passage of the Women’s Reservation Bill could mark a historic milestone, but structural reforms addressing patriarchy, economic inequality, and political violence are crucial. Effective representation entails not only numerical presence but also meaningful participation, enabling women to shape policies and decisions. A feminist vision of Indian democracy ensures that women, across caste, class, and religion, enjoy equal voice and influence in shaping the nation’s future.

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