

# FROM TOKENISM TO SUBSTANTIVE REPRESENTATION: CHARTING THE FUTURE OF WOMEN IN GOVERNANCE IN INDIA \*

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## Abstract

*The Women's Reservation Act has renewed attention to the foregrounding questions concerning representation, agency, and democratic equality. Situating the Act within the broader trajectory of women's political participation in India, efforts to enhance women's participation through constitutional and legislative measures have expanded opportunities for inclusion, yet the relationship between numerical representation and substantive political influence continues to generate significant scholarly and political debate. The relationship between increased representation and genuine political empowerment remains far from straightforward. The persistence of social hierarchies, unequal access to resources, and entrenched institutional barriers raises important questions about whether numerical inclusion alone can transform women's effective political influence. Against this backdrop, the study explores the broader significance of women's representation in democratic politics and situates the Women's Reservation Act within the larger discourse on empowerment, participation, and equality. By examining patterns of representation, electoral participation, and gender disparities in contemporary India, the paper argues that the success of reservation policies cannot be assessed solely through the number of seats occupied by women. Rather, meaningful empowerment depends upon the extent to which women are able to influence decision-making processes, shape public policy, and exercise political autonomy. The study concludes that while reservation remains an important corrective measure, the realization of substantive equality requires deeper social and institutional transformation.*

**Keywords:** *Women's Reservation Act, Political Representation, Substantive Representation, Gender Equality, Democratic Governance, India.*

## Introduction

The Women's Reservation Bill, popularly referred to as the *Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam*, namely the Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill, 2026, generated intense political debate and public discussion across India. The proposal attracted significant attention because it sought to operationalize the principle of reserving 33 percent of seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, a commitment that had already received constitutional recognition through the Constitution (106th Amendment) Act, 2023. Widely regarded as a historic milestone in India's democratic development, the 106th Constitutional Amendment marked a significant advancement in the long-standing demand for greater gender inclusiveness and political representation of women within legislative institutions. Nevertheless, the proposed legislation became a subject of considerable political contestation. Prime Minister Narendra Modi accused opposition parties, particularly the Congress, of having obstructed similar initiatives in the past and argued that they owed an apology to the nation's mothers, sisters, and daughters. Simultaneously, the country witnessed both protest rallies and demonstrations of support, reflecting the polarized nature of public opinion surrounding the measure. Despite extensive political mobilization and rhetorical commitment to women's empowerment, the Bill ultimately failed to secure parliamentary approval. It was defeated in the Lok Sabha on 17 April 2026, receiving 298 votes in favour and 230 votes against, thereby falling short of the constitutionally mandated two-thirds majority of 352 votes required for passage.

Beyond the immediate political controversy, however, the debate surrounding the Bill raises a number of important normative and democratic questions. Was the legislation genuinely intended to advance women's political empowerment and ensure substantive representation, or did it primarily function as a symbolic political gesture aimed at electoral mobilization? More fundamentally, does the proposal represent a transformative intervention capable of addressing structural gender inequalities, or does it merely exemplify the politics of symbolic representation within contemporary democratic systems? Such questions acquire greater significance in a

society characterized by enduring inequalities based on caste, class, patriarchy, and unequal access to social, economic, and political resources. Within this context, the mere reservation of legislative seats may not automatically translate into meaningful political participation or effective decision-making power for women. Critical Mass Theory posits that women who constitute only a small minority within political institutions are often marginalized and possess limited influence over decision-making processes. However, once they attain a critical threshold of representation, they become more capable of shaping policy agendas, influencing legislative outcomes, and challenging established institutional norms (Kanter, 1977; Dahlerup, 1988).<sup>i</sup> However, Sen (1999) contends that the mere availability of opportunities is insufficient; what ultimately matters is individuals' capability to utilize those opportunities and exercise meaningful agency.<sup>ii</sup> From this perspective, political empowerment involves enhancing women's ability to exercise autonomy, make meaningful choices, participate effectively in governance, and influence public policy without coercion or structural disadvantage. Consequently, women's representation should not be evaluated solely in numerical terms; rather, its significance lies in its capacity to generate policies and institutional outcomes that promote women's welfare, security, dignity, education, healthcare, equal opportunities, and social justice. Drawing upon Pitkin's distinction between descriptive and substantive representation (1967), the debate surrounding women's reservation must move beyond numerical presence in legislative bodies and examine whether women are able to exercise meaningful political influence and advance gender-responsive policy outcomes.<sup>iii</sup>

Despite constitutional guarantees, legislative reforms, policy interventions, and more than seven decades of democratic governance, the pursuit of gender parity within India's representative institutions remains complex, uneven, and incomplete. While the Women's Reservation Act seeks to correct the historical underrepresentation of women in legislative bodies through guaranteed quotas, it remains unclear whether increased numerical representation will translate into substantive political empowerment. This tension between symbolic inclusion and structural transformation forms the central problem examined in this study. The present study is descriptive in nature and relied on secondary sources to understand whether the Women's Reservation Act represents symbolic inclusion or substantive political empowerment.

### **Why does Women's presence matters?**

The development of gender as a category of political inquiry marked a significant shift in the study of social and political inequalities. Feminist scholars argued that the unequal position of women could not be adequately explained through biological differences alone. Instead, attention was directed toward the social processes through which societies assign roles, responsibilities, and expectations to individuals based on their perceived sex. These arrangements shape access to education, employment, leadership, and public authority, often privileging men while limiting women's participation in decision-making. By exposing the political consequences of such social arrangements, feminist scholarship broadened the understanding of power and inequality and highlighted the need to challenge institutional practices that reproduce gender hierarchies.

Pitkin's (1967) seminal work laid the conceptual foundations for representation by distinguishing between descriptive, symbolic, and substantive forms of representation, with substantive representation referring to "acting for" constituents. Building on these insights, Phillips (1995) emphasized the importance of the politics of presence, arguing that women's inclusion in political institutions is necessary to rectify historical exclusion and enhance democratic legitimacy. Mansbridge (1999) further justified descriptive representation by demonstrating its value in contexts characterized by mistrust and uncrystallized interests. More recent feminist scholars have questioned the assumption that women's presence automatically translates into substantive outcomes. Childs and Krook (2009) shifted the focus from critical mass to critical actors, while Celis (2009) argued that women's interests are diverse and contested, requiring a broader understanding of who represents women and how substantive representation occurs. Collectively, these scholars highlight that numerical presence alone may have symbolic significance but does not necessarily guarantee substantive change.<sup>iv</sup>

During the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, it was emphasized that for achieving transparent and accountable governance, as well as sustainable development in all areas of life, women empowerment, and improving their social, economic, and political status is crucial. Empowerment is often framed within the context of gender equality, where empowering women is essential for reducing disparities and promoting development. Studies show that when women are empowered, the effects go beyond

individuals. Economically empowered women tend to invest in their children's education and health, creating long-term developmental benefits.<sup>v</sup> Additionally, in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, increases in women's access to education, healthcare, and employment have been widely recognized as key drivers of progress (UN, 2020). Gender Equality roots are considered a critical element in achieving social institutional changes that leads to sustainable development with equality and gender growth. The Global Gender Gap measure was introduced by World Economic Forum to examine four critical areas- economic participation and opportunity, health and survival, educational attainment and Political empowerment. Researchers emphasize that translating descriptive representation into substantive empowerment necessitates moving beyond mere quotas to address intersectional disadvantages and institutional biases that impede genuine decision-making authority (Choudhary et al., 2025; Shayna, 2026).<sup>vi</sup> Empirical studies suggest that the effectiveness of these representatives is often contingent upon their socio-economic backgrounds and the persistence of traditional hierarchies within rural governance structures (Rajaput, 2026).<sup>vii</sup> Consequently, recent investigations propose analytical frameworks to differentiate between tokenistic presence and the exercise of transformative power, which is essential for fostering substantive agency in local democratic bodies (Chaturvedi & Jorasia, 2026).<sup>viii</sup> Specifically, researchers highlight that while legislative quotas have significantly increased the visibility of women, the efficacy of their leadership remains hindered by systemic barriers such as restricted mobility, low literacy rates, and the gendered division of labor (Ahmed et al., 2025; Singh, 2025).<sup>ix</sup> Such findings underscore the 'social embeddedness of policy,' indicating that the translation of formal legislative presence into effective political agency depends heavily on an individual's capacity to negotiate local power dynamics (Kalarmadam, 2018).<sup>x</sup>

### **Women in Indian Politics: Trends and challenges in Representation**

Increasing women's participation and representation in Indian politics requires electoral and parliamentary reforms. Narayanan (1999) argues, Political participation constitutes the first and foremost step in that direction. The number of women standing for elections also needs to increase. Reservations or Quota system seems to be the fastest way of increasing the numbers of women contestants elected. The quota system has proven to be the fastest and most effective way of ensuring women's adequate representation in parliaments all over the world. However, low representation of women in politics is a problem in all of the democratic countries of the world today. In India, the women are provided with political rights which are enshrined in the Constitution but still their participation in politics is not so impressive. The Women's Reservation Bill in this regard is considered an important step in reducing the dismal representation of women in the Parliament and State Legislatures. However, its passage has remained pending since 1996 when it was first introduced. If we look at the pattern of representation of women in Indian Parliament (Lok Sabha) their representation has increased from 22 seats in the 1952 election to 74 seats as of 2026, a phenomenal increase of 36 percentage points. In 1952, women constituted 4.4 percent of Lok Sabha members, and now account for around 13.6 percent, but it is still below the world average of 20 percent (Rai, 2011).<sup>xi</sup> As of 2026 women occupy only 390 out of 4,123 seats in the Legislative Assemblies of India's 28 States. There is a total of 788 MPs in Parliament and 3,878 MLAs across all state assemblies. According to the recent Association for Democratic Reforms Report 2026, there are 4,666 MPs and MLAs across India, of whom only 464 are women accounting for around 10% of all legislators in the country. This indicates a significant gender gap in political representation although the number of women legislators in India has increased over time, their representation remains disproportionately low given that women constitute nearly 49% of India's population. The 2024 Lok Sabha elections revealed a significant paradox in women's political engagement in India. According to the Election Commission of India, women voters recorded a turnout of 65.8 per cent, marginally surpassing the male turnout of 65.6 per cent. This marked only the second occasion in the history of Lok Sabha elections that women outvoted men. Furthermore, women constituted 48.6 per cent of the total electorate, an increase from 48.1 per cent in 2019, while the number of female electors per 1,000 male electors rose from 926 in 2019 to 946 in 2024. Despite these encouraging trends in electoral participation, women's representation as political candidates and elected representatives remained limited. Of the 8,360 candidates who contested the 2024 general elections, only 800 (9.5 per cent) were women. Although 74 women were elected to the 18th Lok Sabha, the second-highest number in India's parliamentary history after 2019 they accounted for only 13.6 per cent of the House. Additionally, 152 of the 543 parliamentary constituencies had no woman candidate contesting the election. These findings suggest that the principal challenge to women's political representation in India no longer lies in voter participation. Rather,

the persistence of underrepresentation points towards structural barriers embedded within political parties, candidate selection processes, and broader socio-political institutions that continue to restrict women’s access to electoral politics. <sup>xii</sup>The evidence therefore indicates that increasing women’s participation as voters, while necessary, is insufficient to ensure equitable representation in legislative bodies.

**Table 1: Representation of Women in Lok Sabha 1952-2024**

Lok Sabha	Total no. of seats (Elections Held)	No. of Women Members who won	% of the Total
First (1952)	489	22	4.4
Second(1957)	494	27	5.4
Third(1962)	494	34	6.7
Fourth(1967)	523	31	5.9
Fifth(1971)	521	22	4.2
Sixth(1977)	544	19	3.4
Seventh(1980)	544	28	5.1
Eight(1984)	544	44	8.1
Ninth(1989)	529	28	5.3
Tenth(1991)	509	36	7.0
Eleventh(1996)	541	40*	7.4
Twelfth(1998)	545	44*	8.0
Thirteenth(1999)	543	48*	8.8
Fourteenth(2004)	543	45*	8.1
Fifteenth(2009)	543	59	10.9
Sixteenth(2014)	543	61	11.2
Seventeenth(2019)	543	78	14.3
Eighteenth(2024)	543	74	13.6

Note: \* Including one nominated member

Source: Election Commission of India

The above figures indicate that the passage of the Nari Shakti Vandam Adhiniyam in 2023 was hailed as a historic milestone for gender parity. However, the subsequent 2024 general elections revealed the hollow nature of this symbolic victory. Instead of progressing towards the mandated 33% benchmark, descriptive female representation actually retrogressed from 78 MPs in 2019 to just 74 in 2024. This decline occurring immediately after the bill’s enactment reveals a jarring paradox: political parties are eager to claim the moral high ground by passing laws, yet they remain deeply reluctant to voluntarily nominate women candidates. This disconnect underscores a culture of tokenism. Where legislative promises serve as political rhetoric while patriarchal gatekeeping continues to restrict actual access to power. While the concept of tokenism has often been used to explain the limited impact of women’s presence in political institutions, reducing women’s underrepresentation solely to symbolic inclusion overlooks the complex barriers embedded within the political process. Recent analysis demonstrates that women’s access to electoral politics in India is shaped by multiple structural constraints, including party gatekeeping, dynastic politics, unequal access to financial resources and gendered leadership. Sarkar and Dhanuka (2026) argue that women’s underrepresentation in Indian electoral politics reflects not a lack of female aspirants but the presence of “compound barriers” within party structures. Analyzing the 2024 general elections, they found that only 14.9 per cent of the 1,108 candidates fielded by the BJP, Congress, and their alliances were women. Moreover, 40.6 per cent of all women candidates had political family backgrounds, including 42.2 per cent of BJP’s women candidates and

38.3 per cent of Congress's women candidates, suggesting that dynastic networks continue to shape women's pathways into electoral politics.<sup>xiii</sup>

As compared to the Parliament, women in India are much better represented in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) after enactment of 73rd Amendment Act 1992. This seems to be a result of Article 243D of the Indian Constitution, mandating, at least, 1/3rd of the seats in all tiers of the Panchayat. In fact, the average of women's representation in Panchayats across the country is 36.94 percent. However, a few States have gone beyond the mandated 33 percent and provided for more reservation for women. According to Official Ministry Panchayati Raj records 21 States have legally enacted a 50 percent seats for women in PRIs. In fact, in a significant decision, the Union Cabinet in August 2009 approved an amendment to the Article 243D of the Constitution to enhance reservation of seats for women in all tiers of PRIs in all states to 50 percent to be filled by direct elections, but not all the states in India have adopted similar legislations, the union territories of Lakshadweep and Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu have also extended the reservation policy to 50%. The Act which provides the constitutional status to PRIs ensure the equal access and increased participation of people of all categories including the women in the decentralized democratic decision-making processes. The Articles 243D (3) and 243T (3) of the Constitution states that, "Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every panchayat and municipalities shall be reserved for women and such seats may be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a panchayat. Similarly, clause (4) of Articles 243D and 243T further provides that "Not less than one-third of the total number of offices of Chairpersons in the Panchayat and Municipalities at all levels shall be reserved for women" (GOI 1992).<sup>xiv</sup>

### **The Asymmetry of Progress: Quantifying India's Gender Gaps**

Gender bias is inherent characteristic of a patriarchal society. Discrimination against women begins even before her birth. Any denial of equality, gender and opportunity on the basis of gender is gender discrimination. India ranked 141 st out of 142 nations and 2062 districts in the world that are categorized as gender critical when it comes to health and survival of women as compared to men.<sup>xv</sup> In the Gender Inequality Index 2022 released by UNDP in their Human Development Report 2023-2024 India stands at rank 108<sup>th</sup> out of 193 countries. The current data shows significant jump of 14 ranks as compared to 2021 where India ranked 122 out of 191 countries Over the last 10 years. India's rank in Gender Inequality Index has become consistently better indicating progressive improvement in equality between female and male achievement in these areas. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21), for women aged between 15-49, indicates that the overall sex ratio in India is 1020 females per 1000 males, but the sex ratio at birth remains low at 929, highlighting ongoing sex selection. The NFHS-5 also reveals that 18.7% of women aged 15-49 are underweight, 21.2% are stunted, and nearly 53% are anemic. The female literacy rate is 70.3% compared to 84.7% for males. India has one of the widest gender wage gaps globally, with women earning only 21% of men income on average, according to the Global Gender Gap Report 2021. Currently, women make up only 14.94% of Members of Parliament (MPs). Data from the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (April 2023) shows that around 46.94% of panchayat elected representatives are women, but the 'Sarpanch-Pati' culture often reduces the effectiveness of this representation.<sup>xvi</sup> 18.4% of 15- 49-year-old women reported being physically or sexually abused by a current or former intimate partner in 2018. As of Dec-20, only 44.3% of gender-focused SDG data were accessible, including unpaid care and domestic work, crucial labour market indicators including the gender wage gap, and information and communications technology skills. Gender and poverty, physical and sexual harassment, women's access to assets (including land), and gender and the environment lack similar monitoring methods. These gender data gaps must be closed for India to meet gender-related SDGs.<sup>xvii</sup> The National Crime Records Bureau "Crime in India" 2021 report recorded over 400,000 cases of crimes against women. National Family Health Survey-5 shows that 23.3% of women aged 20-24 were married before age 18. The Ministry of Education, Government of India reported 92 females for 100 boys in basic school and 94 in upper primary. In secondary and senior secondary schools, 92 and 95 females per 100 boys were enrolled. Higher education is crucial for nation's future, progress and global standing. Annual Status of Higher Education (ASHE) 2024 report offer a more optimistic perspective. Report shows there has been notable increase in Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER), Gender Parity Index (GPI) also improved with women's enrollment surpassing men in recent years. The NSO Periodic Labour Force Survey for 2018-19 and 2019-20 found that rural ladies worker population ratio (WPR) – "size of the workforce as a percentage of the population" in

‘current weekly status’ grew from 19% to 24%. It rose from 14.5% to 16.8% in cities. In rural and urban regions, male WPRs exceeded 50% for both years. Indian women spend 280 minutes a day on unpaid domestic and caregiving services for household members, according to NSO data from 2019 males took 36 minutes.<sup>xviii</sup> According to the Report published in 2024 on Women Empowerment at the Subnational Level: Towards Achieving Gender Equality (SDG 5) by IIM, Ahmedabad, the study was conducted in over 705 districts in 28 states and 8 union territories of India for women aged between 15 and 49. The report highlights the distribution of women empowerment across four key domains: decision-making, autonomy over income, and physical mobility; control over income and economic empowerment educational and informational empowerment; and work balance. Out of 705 districts, 476 districts (67.52%) show empowerment in decision-making, autonomy over income, and physical mobility, the highest percentage. 436 districts (61.28%) report empowerment in control over income and economic activities. Educational and informational empowerment is seen in 325 districts (46.10%), while the lowest empowerment is in work balance, with only 217 districts (32.25%) showing progress. These findings highlight areas of success and where targeted interventions are needed, particularly in education and work-life balance.<sup>xix</sup> The analysis highlights the need to improve women’s access to education and resources, increase their control over economic contributions, and address the high burden of unpaid domestic work. Despite progress in autonomy and decision-making, women still face limitations in economic independence. Targeted interventions are essential to advance women’s empowerment and achieve the SDGs by 2030.

### **Navigating Contemporary Obstacles and Future of Governance**

Women’s political participation in India requires improvement and interventions at multiple levels. Legislative reforms aimed at enhancing women’s representation in higher political institutions should be complemented by efforts to strengthen women’s educational and economic capacities. Equally important is the transformation of political party structures to provide women with greater access to leadership and decision-making positions, the need for leadership development programmes, gender sensitive media practices and safer political environments free from intimidation and discrimination.

Purohit (2021) argues that increasing the number of women elected to political office does not automatically ensure effective governance outcomes. Drawing on evidence from local governance institutions in Telangana, she demonstrates that women representatives frequently encounter bureaucratic resistance that limits their ability to implement policies. To address this challenge, the author suggests strengthening women’s access to political and social networks, expanding opportunities for mentorship and solidarity among women leaders, and creating institutional incentives that encourage bureaucratic responsiveness to female representatives.<sup>xx</sup> Increasing the number of women in governance bodies does not necessarily ensure that they can participate equally in decision-making. A study from Nepal found that women continue to face obstacles such as traditional gender expectations, limited access to information, household responsibilities, and unequal power relations within institutions. The Researchers suggests that efforts to improve women’s participation should focus not only on increasing representation but also on providing training opportunities, encouraging community support, and creating conditions that allow women to express their views confidently and influence decisions effectively.<sup>xxi</sup>

Women’s safety in India continues to remain deeply compromised despite decades of legal reforms, stricter criminal laws, and public outrage following cases of sexual violence. The persistence of rape, abuse, and gender-based violence raises serious questions regarding the effectiveness of implementation, political accountability, and institutional justice. The recent RG Kar case once again exposed widespread public dissatisfaction with the criminal justice system, as allegations, political blame games, and demands for justice overshadowed the need for a transparent, fair, and timely investigation. Many citizens felt that the victim did not receive complete justice, which further intensified distrust toward the state machinery and the perceived failure of the government to ensure women’s safety.

The political developments that followed also generated critical debate. The decision of the BJP to provide an electoral ticket to the victim’s mother, who later won the election, was viewed by some as a gesture of solidarity and recognition of public sentiment. However, it simultaneously raises deeper ethical and political questions: does electoral representation of victims’ family members address the structural roots of violence against women? Can symbolic political inclusion substitute for genuine institutional reform and accountability? More importantly, does such political mobilization truly ensure justice for the victim who suffered brutal violence, or does it risk transforming personal tragedy into electoral strategy?

These developments highlight a broader concern within democratic politics, whether parties across ideological lines genuinely prioritize women's safety or merely respond to public outrage for political gain. Sustainable justice requires more than symbolic gestures; it demands impartial investigations, speedy trials, strict punishment of perpetrators, institutional transparency, and an end to political patronage, protection, and corruption that often shield influential offenders.

## Conclusion

The increase in the number of women in political institutions is important, but numerical presence alone cannot be equated with empowerment. What matters is whether women are able to exercise real influence over decision-making and bring attention to issues affecting women's lives, including safety, dignity, and equality. The debate between critical mass and critical actors also remains relevant, as meaningful change may depend not only on the number of women in politics but also on the presence of committed individuals who actively advocate for women's interests. In this context, Amartya Sen's capability approach offers an important perspective by arguing that empowerment goes beyond education or economic independence. Women are truly empowered when they possess the freedom and capability to make choices, participate without fear, live with dignity, and are not constrained by patriarchy or other forms of social disadvantage based on caste, religion, or gender. Therefore, the question is not simply whether women are represented, but whether their representation translates into substantive power and agency.

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