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Women's Political Participation in India: From Descriptive Representation to Substantive Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

Women's political participation has long been regarded as a crucial indicator of democratic inclusion, gender justice, and social empowerment. In India, constitutional guarantees, electoral reforms, and affirmative measures—particularly the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments—have significantly expanded women's formal representation in political institutions, especially at the level of local self-government. However, the central question remains whether this increase in numerical participation has translated into substantive political empowerment. This paper critically examines the relationship between women's political participation and empowerment in India through a historical and analytical review of institutional reforms, policy frameworks, and secondary empirical evidence. Using a critical policy analysis approach, the study explores the gap between descriptive representation and substantive agency by assessing women's access to decision-making, leadership roles, political autonomy, and public policy influence. The analysis shows that reservation policies have created important entry points for women in governance and have enhanced their visibility in public life. Nevertheless, persistent patriarchal norms, socio-cultural constraints, limited education and economic resources, proxy representation, and institutional weaknesses continue to restrict women's effective political agency. The paper argues that political participation, while indispensable, cannot by itself ensure women's empowerment unless it is accompanied by structural transformation, institutional support, sustained capacity-building, and the erosion of socio-cultural constraints that limit women's agency. It concludes that women's political participation in India remains a necessary but insufficient condition for empowerment, as descriptive representation does not automatically yield substantive political power. Genuine empowerment requires a shift from numerical inclusion to autonomous decision-making, effective policy influence, and transformative participation in democratic governance.

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Introduction

Political empowerment of women is widely recognized as a critical indicator of democratic quality and inclusive governance. While international frameworks—most notably the Beijing Declaration—have long emphasized the necessity of women's advancement, the translation of these global commitments into substantive political agency remains a complex challenge (United Nations, 1995, para. 12). Empowerment, in this context, extends beyond descriptive representation (numerical presence) to encompass the capacity to influence decision-making, challenge structural barriers, and ensure gender-responsive policy formulation. As Hanna Pitkin articulated, substantive representation is effectively “acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them” (Pitkin, 1967, p. 209).

Despite significant global progress in acknowledging gender equality, there remains a persistent “representation-empowerment gap.” Increased participation in formal political structures does not automatically equate to genuine political agency, particularly in environments constrained by deep-seated institutional and socio-cultural barriers. Nowhere is this tension more evident than in India, where the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act revolutionized local governance by institutionalizing quotas for women within the *Panchayati Raj* institutions (The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) (Act, 1992, 1993). While these reforms have successfully expanded the descriptive representation of women at the grassroots level, the extent to which this participation translates into substantive political empowerment remains a subject of intense academic debate, with studies often highlighting that numerical presence does not inherently guarantee decision-making authority (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004, p. 1410).

This paper critically analyzes women's political empowerment in India through an institutional governance lens. It examines how formal constitutional guarantees, particularly gender reservations in local governance, interact with informal power structures and socio-cultural constraints to shape the extent of women's effective political agency. The remainder of this paper conceptualizes the framework of political empowerment, evaluates the current state of women's participation in Indian local governance, identifies institutional hindrances, and proposes evidence-based measures to move from tokenistic representation toward substantive political authority.

Review of Literature

The scholarly discourse on women's political participation has evolved into a complex field that moves beyond the simple quantification of seats to analyzing the qualitative nature of governance. A pivotal conceptual axis in this literature is the distinction established by Hanna Pitkin between *descriptive representation*—the mere presence of women in office—and *substantive representation*—the capacity of these representatives to enact policies that reflect the interests of women (Pitkin 1967, p. 209). This distinction is critical for evaluating political empowerment, which Naila Kabeer (1999) defines as the process by which individuals acquire the ability to make strategic life choices previously denied to them. In the political sphere, this implies not just holding

power, but possessing the “agency” to influence decision-making, challenge structural hierarchies, and reshape policy agendas (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438).

Within the Indian context, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act (1992) serves as the primary institutional framework for analysis. This landmark reform mandated a one-third reservation for women in *Panchayati Raj* Institutions (PRIs), fundamentally altering the landscape of grassroots democracy. Scholarship in this area is largely divided between proponents of institutional change and skeptics of rapid decentralization. Proponents of institutional reform, most notably Chattopadhyay & Duflo (2004), provide influential empirical evidence that mandated representation can lead to shifts in local policy priorities, particularly in areas such as drinking water and other public goods that are often more closely aligned with women’s concerns. Furthermore, recent studies indicate that institutional reform creates long-term social externalities; for example, Beaman et al. (2012) demonstrated that sustained exposure to female leaders fundamentally alters the aspirations of adolescent girls, thereby eroding deeply entrenched gender-role stereotypes in rural communities (p. 582).

Notwithstanding these gains, a significant body of literature highlights a persistent “representation-empowerment gap.” One of the most widely discussed concerns in this debate is the phenomenon of proxy representation—often referred to as *Panchayat Pati*—where the authority of elected women is informally mediated or overshadowed by male relatives. Scholars such as Desai & Thakkar (2007) argue that this pattern should not be understood merely as an individual-level limitation; rather, it reflects broader patriarchal structures embedded in local political and social institutions. This challenges the notion that quotas are a panacea; rather, they serve as a starting point that requires complementary structural reforms to be effective. The literature further suggests that without adequate training, political mentoring, and institutional safeguards, women in reserved seats may remain constrained in exercising effective authority over key governance processes, including deliberation, resource allocation, and local decision-making (Tadros, 2010).

Beyond local governance, scholars have identified a broader set of institutional barriers that constrain women’s political agency. These include intra-party hierarchies that favor male incumbency, the prohibitive costs of campaigning, and the persistent threat of political violence—factors that create an “unfriendly” environment for women entering formal politics (World Bank, 2012; UNDP, 2020). Consequently, current scholarship is shifting toward a more nuanced understanding: one that views women’s political empowerment as a multi-dimensional process. It is increasingly argued that for descriptive representation to transition into substantive political authority, there must be a parallel transformation in institutional culture, gender sensitization of political cadres, and the strengthening of accountability mechanisms at the local level.

This paper builds upon this research gap. While existing literature extensively documents the outcomes of reservations at the village level, there remains a critical need for a deeper institutional analysis of how these formal mechanisms interact with informal power brokers to limit substantive

agency. This study aims to provide this analysis by critically evaluating the governance frameworks that impede or facilitate women's true political autonomy in contemporary India.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, document-based research design to examine the relationship between women's political participation and political empowerment in India, with particular attention to Panchayati Raj Institutions and the broader institutional context of local governance. The analysis relies exclusively on secondary sources, including constitutional provisions, legislative and policy documents, government reports, publications of international organizations, and peer-reviewed academic literature on women's political participation, representation, and empowerment.

The study is guided by a critical policy analysis perspective, which enables an examination of both formal institutional arrangements and the broader structural, political, and socio-cultural conditions that shape women's political agency. Rather than treating increased political participation as an indicator of empowerment in itself, the analysis critically evaluates the extent to which constitutional reforms, reservation policies, and governance institutions have enabled women to exercise meaningful authority, influence decision-making, and participate autonomously in democratic processes.

The analytical framework is informed by the distinction between descriptive representation and substantive representation developed by Pitkin (1967), complemented by Kabeer's (1999) conceptualization of empowerment as the expansion of agency and the capacity to make strategic life choices. These complementary perspectives provide the conceptual basis for assessing whether women's increased presence in political institutions has translated into substantive political empowerment.

The selection of documentary sources was based on their relevance to three interrelated dimensions of the research problem: institutional mechanisms promoting women's political participation, structural barriers limiting effective political agency, and scholarly evidence on the outcomes of gender quotas and democratic decentralization in India. Through qualitative interpretive analysis and critical synthesis of these sources, the study develops an institutional understanding of the relationship between formal political inclusion and substantive empowerment.

As a review-based qualitative inquiry, this research does not generate primary empirical data or seek to establish causal relationships through field investigation. Instead, it synthesizes existing scholarly and policy evidence to provide a theoretically informed and institutionally grounded interpretation of the opportunities and constraints shaping women's political empowerment in contemporary India, with particular reference to the experience of Jammu and Kashmir.

Conceptualizing Political Empowerment of Women

Political empowerment of women is a multidimensional construct that transcends mere numerical participation. As Naila Kabeer argues, empowerment is essentially the expansion of people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied (Kabeer 1999, 437). Within the political sphere, this suggests that empowerment is not an end-state but a process of transformation in power relations, requiring both the dismantling of patriarchal structures and the enhancement of women's individual and collective agency.

A central tension in this discourse lies in the distinction between "descriptive" and "substantive" representation. Hanna Pitkin established the foundational understanding of representation as acting in the interest of the represented, a standard that remains critical in modern gender politics (Pitkin 1967, 210). Anne Phillips, in her seminal work, further argues that the presence of women in political institutions is a necessary condition for addressing the systematic exclusion of their interests (Phillips 1995, 25). However, presence does not automatically equate to influence. The representation-empowerment gap highlights that while descriptive representation (numerical presence) may be achieved through institutional mechanisms, it does not guarantee substantive representation—defined as the capacity to effectively influence policy outcomes and address gender-specific concerns. In this regard Phillips says: “when does charged with making the political decisions are predominantly drawn from one of the two sexes or one of what may be numerous ethnic groups, this puts the others in the category of political minors”. (Phillips 1995, 39).

In this context, gender quotas have emerged as a primary instrument for fostering inclusion. Drude Dahlerup emphasizes that while quotas are effective in breaking the political exclusion of women, their success is contingent upon the institutional and socio-cultural environment in which they operate (Dahlerup 2006, 4). In the Indian context, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act serves as a critical case study of this dynamic. While Chattopadhyay and Duflo demonstrate that reservation policies in Panchayati Raj institutions have significantly altered policy priorities to align with women's preferences (Chattopadhyay & Duflo 2004, 1440), subsequent research cautions that institutional entry often coexists with informal structural constraints. These constraints, including proxy representation, limited access to resources, and patriarchal social norms, often mediate and dilute the transformative potential of quotas (Chattopadhyay & Duflo 2004, 1442). Therefore, political empowerment must be conceptualized not just as the act of participation, but as the sustained capacity to challenge institutional hierarchies and exercise autonomous decision-making power.

From Participation to Empowerment

Women's political empowerment is not merely a quantitative goal of proportional representation; it is a fundamental prerequisite for inclusive governance and transformative policy change. At the normative level, women's political participation is both a human right and a catalyst for responsive governance, ensuring that public decision-making reflects the diverse needs of society (UN

Women 2018). However, a persistent “representation-empowerment gap” remains a critical challenge globally. Despite modest improvements—such as the global parliamentary representation rising to 27.2% by early 2025 (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2025)—progress remains stalled in many regions. The World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report (2023) further confirms that political empowerment continues to be the most resistant subindex to closure, with only 22.1% of the global gender gap narrowed, highlighting that access to formal office does not automatically equate to political influence.

Access to formal political office does not automatically translate into political influence. To understand this gap, it is necessary to distinguish between descriptive representation, understood as the numerical presence of women in political institutions, and substantive representation, which concerns the ability of representatives to act in ways that advance the interests of those they represent (Pitkin, 1967, p. 209). From Kabeer’s (1999) perspective, empowerment involves the expansion of people’s ability to make strategic life choices in contexts where that ability was previously denied. This process is analytically connected to the interrelated dimensions of resources, agency, and achievements (Kabeer, 1999, pp. 437–438). Applied to political institutions, this framework suggests that the establishment of quotas or the reservation of seats should not be treated as a sufficient measure of empowerment. Quotas can create important opportunities for women’s entry into political office, but their transformative effects depend on the institutional and sociocultural conditions under which women exercise power (Dahlerup, 2006). Accordingly, women’s numerical inclusion may remain limited in substantive impact when elected representatives lack access to resources, institutional support, decision-making autonomy, and the authority necessary to influence policy outcomes.

Empirical evidence from the Indian context provides a nuanced understanding of these dynamics. The implementation of gender quotas in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) offers a unique laboratory for analyzing the transition from descriptive to substantive representation. Research by Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) demonstrates that mandated reservations for women in village councils (Gram Panchayats) led to significant shifts in local policy outcomes, specifically in public good provision. By prioritizing infrastructure relevant to the lived experiences of women—such as water access and road connectivity—women leaders challenged the existing status quo of public investment.

Yet, this success also underscores the complexity of structural constraints. While the PRI experiment proved that women’s presence could alter policy, subsequent literature suggests that these gains are often mediated by ongoing social hierarchies, caste-based exclusions, and the “double burden” of domestic and public responsibilities (UN Women 2018). Thus, political empowerment must be viewed as an iterative process. It requires not just the formal inclusion of women, but a systematic dismantling of the social and structural barriers—ranging from restrictive norms to unequal resource distribution—that impede their substantive influence. Understanding

this interplay between formal quotas and informal power dynamics remains the central challenge for advancing women's political participation in both Indian and broader Global South contexts.

Women's Political Representation in India: Progress and Constraints

The position of women in India began to change significantly during the nineteenth century, when social reform and nationalist debates challenged entrenched restrictions on women's lives. Reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy became closely associated with the campaign against *sati*, while Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar advocated widow remarriage and the expansion of girls' education. These reforms were part of a broader colonial-era effort to redefine women's roles. However, as Lata Mani demonstrates in her analysis of the *sati* debates, this discourse was predominantly articulated and framed by male reformers, missionaries, and colonial authorities within a civilizing framework, rather than by women themselves (Mani 1998, pp. 143–144)¹. Over time, such initiatives helped create a foundation for women's education, public awareness, and participation in social reform. However, they did not eliminate gender inequality; instead, they opened limited but important space for women's entry into public life and for the later growth of women's political consciousness.

In India, the women's movement emerged more visibly in the post-independence period, but its roots lie in the nationalist struggle and the longer history of social reform. During the freedom movement, women participated actively in anti-colonial politics, although their involvement was shaped by a patriarchal nationalist framework that often defined women's public role in moral rather than fully egalitarian terms. Gandhi's mass politics nevertheless created important space for women's mobilization: while women were excluded from the initial Salt March, they became central to the wider Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930–31, which saw extensive women's participation in picketing, salt making, and public protest. In this regard Parr asserts: “Although women were excluded from the Salt March itself, the civil disobedience campaign is widely regarded as a watershed moment for anti-colonial women's activism... s Gandhi and his followers reached the end of the SaltMarch at Dandi, the presence of Naidu by his side symbolized the centrality of women to the struggle” (Parr 2023, p. 834-835)².

The women's movement in India gained further institutional and intellectual momentum during the 1970s, particularly following the establishment of the Committee on the Status of Women in India in 1971 and the publication of its report, *Towards Equality*, in 1974. The report documented the continuing gap between India's constitutional commitment to gender equality and women's actual social, economic, educational, and political conditions. It highlighted persistent inequalities in literacy, employment, demographic status, and representation in legislative and decision-making institutions, demonstrating that formal legal guarantees had not automatically produced substantive gender equality (Government of India, 1974; Model Diplomat, 2026). The report

1. See also Forbes, 1996).

2. In this regard, see also (Forbes 2018).

subsequently influenced the development of women-oriented policies, institutional initiatives, and the broader policy environment in which later reforms in local governance emerged.

The Constitution of India provides an important legal foundation for gender equality through Articles 14, 15, and 16, while Article 15(3) authorizes the state to adopt special provisions for women (Constitution of India, arts. 14–16). India also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1993, reaffirming its international commitment to eliminating discrimination against women (United Nations Treaty Collection, n.d.). At the level of local governance, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments introduced a constitutional requirement that not less than one-third of the seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions and municipalities be reserved for women, including seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes where applicable (Government of India, 1992a, 1992b). Several states subsequently increased women's reservation in local self-government institutions to 50 percent through state-level legislation and policy measures, including Bihar, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, West Bengal, and other states (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, n.d.). Nevertheless, women's continued underrepresentation in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies indicates that formal inclusion has not yet fully translated into substantive political power.

The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2021 ranked India 140th out of 156 countries overall, with a score indicating that the country had closed 62.5% of its gender gap. Although India performed relatively better on the Political Empowerment subindex than on several other dimensions of gender equality, this did not necessarily indicate substantive political empowerment for women. Rather, it pointed to a complex and uneven picture in which women's presence in political institutions has expanded, while broader structures of gender inequality remain deeply entrenched (World Economic Forum, 2021).

The Government of India, through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, established a transformative institutional framework for strengthening women's political participation at the grassroots level. These constitutional reforms mandated that not less than one-third of the seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions and urban local bodies be reserved for women, including reserved seats for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, thereby creating unprecedented opportunities for women's entry into formal politics (Government of India, 1992a, 1992b). Consequently, women's numerical representation in local governance increased substantially, making Panchayati Raj Institutions one of the most important arenas for women's political participation and leadership in India (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2008)

Women in India have also participated politically through a wide range of campaigns and social interventions, including movements related to peace, good governance, dowry, rape, domestic violence, food adulteration, and rising prices. However, the critical question is whether women's reservation in politics has translated into meaningful participation and decision-making power, or whether women's inclusion has remained largely formal and symbolic.

A substantial body of research suggests that the increase in women's representation at the grassroots level has had important effects, but these effects are neither uniform nor uncontested. In a widely cited study based on West Bengal and Rajasthan, Chattopadhyay and Duflo found that women leaders in village councils were more likely to invest in public goods that reflected women's priorities, including drinking water and local infrastructure. Their findings suggest that women's presence in local institutions can shape policy choices and resource allocation in ways that are responsive to community needs(Chattopadhyay, R., & Duflo, E 2004).

At the same time, the existence of women representatives does not automatically guarantee equal authority within political institutions. Studies have shown that women's actual decision-making power may remain constrained by patriarchal norms, caste hierarchies, limited access to education, dependence on male family members, and a lack of institutional support. Ban and Rao (2008), for example, argue that women's reservation may produce both agency and tokenism, depending on the local social and political context. This means that numerical participation alone cannot be treated as a sufficient indicator of political empowerment.

Despite the efforts of the state and civil society, the broader picture remains mixed. Many analysts note that men often continue to function as the principal decision-makers, while women representatives are sometimes expected to occupy a more passive or secondary role. In many cases, the work of women politicians is dismissed, undervalued, or inadequately recognized by their male counterparts. Therefore, the issue is not merely the presence of women in political office, but the degree to which they are able to exercise independent authority, influence decision-making, and participate meaningfully in governance.

The Indian case demonstrates that reservation policies can create important institutional openings for women's entry into politics, particularly at the local level. However, the translation of numerical inclusion into substantive empowerment depends on wider institutional and socio-cultural conditions. Political participation becomes substantively meaningful when women are able to exercise influence over institutions, policy agendas, and public resources rather than remaining merely symbolically present. This distinction reflects Pitkin's conceptualization of representation as acting in the interests of the represented in a responsive manner (Pitkin, 1967, p. 209) and Phillips's argument that the political presence of historically excluded groups is relevant to the representation of their interests (Phillips, 1995, pp. 25–26, 41). Accordingly, descriptive representation should be understood as an important institutional entry point, but not as conclusive evidence of substantive political empowerment.

Jammu and Kashmir Perspective

Women's political participation in Jammu and Kashmir must be understood within a historically layered context shaped by monarchy, colonial and princely rule, nationalism, democratic restructuring, and protracted conflict. Although formal political power has largely remained male-dominated, women have not been absent from the political history of the region. Historical chronicles of Kashmir mention female rulers such as Yashovati, Sugandha, Didda, and Kota Rani,

indicating that women could, in exceptional dynastic circumstances, occupy positions of sovereign authority. Yet the presence of such figures should not be read as evidence of generalized gender equality. Rather, it suggests that women's access to power historically appeared in selective and exceptional forms, without necessarily transforming the structural position of women in society at large (Kalhana, trans. Stein, 1979).

The modern history of women's public participation in Jammu and Kashmir becomes more clearly visible in the twentieth century, particularly during the period of political awakening under Dogra dynasty¹. As new forms of mobilization emerged, women increasingly appeared in demonstrations, reformist initiatives, political meetings, and broader nationalist activity. Their participation was significant because it challenged the confinement of women to the domestic sphere and opened limited but meaningful avenues for political visibility. At the same time, women's activism was often mediated through socially sanctioned roles such as caregiving, moral authority, and communal responsibility. Consequently, although women entered public politics, their participation did not always translate into an autonomous gender-based political agenda.

A major landmark in this trajectory was the 1944 Naya Kashmir manifesto of the All Jammu and Kashmir National Conference. The manifesto articulated a progressive vision of social transformation and included a charter of women's rights within a broader programme of democratic reform and social justice. Its significance lay in the fact that women's rights were explicitly incorporated into a political project of societal restructuring. However, this commitment remained largely programmatic; it signaled an important ideological aspiration rather than the immediate realization of women's equality in institutional practice (National Conference, 1944).

Women's political engagement also became visible in the crisis-ridden context of 1947. The Women's Self-Defence Corps, associated with the defense of Srinagar during the tribal invasion, offers an important example of women's participation in relief, communication, and local defense efforts. This episode is historically significant because it complicates reductive narratives that portray Kashmiri women only as victims of political violence. Instead, it shows that women were active participants in moments of collective crisis and political transformation. However, for the sake of historical precision, the Women's Self-Defence Corps should be located specifically in the events of 1947 and not conflated with earlier anti-Dogra mobilizations or the 1946 Quit Kashmir movement (Whitehead, 2007; Kaul, 2022).

Despite these important precedents, women have remained underrepresented in formal electoral politics in Jammu and Kashmir. Their presence in legislatures, party structures, and competitive political office has been limited relative to men's participation. Moreover, women who achieved political prominence have often done so through elite or family-based political networks. This pattern reflects a broader tension between access and autonomy: entry into politics may be

1. The Dogra dynasty ruled Jammu and Kashmir from 1846 to 1947; its period saw social and political changes that contributed to a political awakening and increased public activity by women in the region.

facilitated by kinship-based political capital, but such entry does not necessarily broaden women's collective representation or create an independent women's political constituency. The result is that women's formal inclusion often remains selective and mediated rather than structurally democratized.

This limited inclusion has also affected the development of a sustained gender-centered political agenda. Women's participation has often been accepted when linked to larger concerns such as nationalism, welfare, peace, or community survival, but less consistently when framed in terms of political autonomy, gender justice, or feminist transformation. In this respect, women's visibility in the public sphere has not always been matched by an equivalent degree of agenda-setting power. The distinction between being present in politics and being able to shape politics is therefore crucial to any assessment of women's political status in Jammu and Kashmir.

Although the post-1947 period brought important institutional and social changes, including expanded educational opportunities and formal commitments to women's rights, these developments did not automatically resolve entrenched gender inequalities. Political awareness, economic change, and educational expansion contributed to shifts in women's aspirations and public roles, but substantive equality remained uneven. Formal inclusion was not always accompanied by decision-making power, resource control, or independent political legitimacy.

What Ails Women's Participation in Politics?

The barriers to women's political participation in Jammu and Kashmir are structural as well as cultural. Patriarchal norms continue to shape political recruitment, candidate selection, public legitimacy, and access to leadership positions. Women frequently encounter restricted access to campaign resources, weak institutional support, limited political training, and the persistent burden of domestic and caregiving responsibilities. In addition, the dominance of male-centered party structures and informal networks often means that women's political advancement depends less on meritocratic competition than on access to patronage, kinship, or elite mediation.

A particularly powerful barrier is the enduring perception that leadership is intrinsically masculine. Women in politics are often judged against gendered expectations that associate authority, strategic judgment, and public decision-making with men. As a result, women leaders may face heightened scrutiny, diminished legitimacy, and a continual need to prove competence in ways rarely demanded of their male counterparts. These symbolic obstacles matter because they shape not only women's entry into politics, but also the extent to which they can act effectively after assuming office.

The Indian experience with Panchayati Raj Institutions provides a useful comparative framework for understanding this problem. Constitutional reservation has undoubtedly expanded women's access to grassroots political institutions, and empirical evidence suggests that women's leadership can influence policy priorities and local public-goods provision. Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004),

for example, demonstrate that women leaders in village councils were more likely to direct public spending toward issues of immediate concern to women, such as water and infrastructure. Yet the broader literature also shows that numerical representation alone does not guarantee substantive empowerment. The effects of reservation depend heavily on local hierarchies, educational inequalities, class and caste structures, and the institutional environment in which women exercise office (Ban & Rao, 2008, p.501-502). In this regard Ban says: "We found that there is less evidence in support of the tokenism hypothesis. Women leaders tend to be picked from among more politically knowledgeable and wealthier women. Panchayats led by women are no worse or better in their performance than those with male leaders, and women politicians do not make decisions in line with the needs of women. Importantly, however, political experience enhances the performance of women leaders more than it does for men, women in villages which are less dominated by upper castes, and in states that have relatively mature panchayat systems, perform better than men. This suggests that institutional factors affect women politicians more than they affect men" (Ban & Rao, 2008, p. 505).

These insights are especially relevant in contexts such as Jammu and Kashmir, where conflict, insecurity, and uneven institutional development can intensify the barriers women already face. Even when women hold formal office, they may lack the administrative information, financial resources, mobility, and institutional backing necessary to act independently. In such circumstances, formal representation risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive. This problem is further illuminated by scholarship on proxy representation in local governance, where male relatives or local elites informally influence or control the decisions of elected women. Although such arrangements should not be generalized to all women representatives, they underscore the distinction between descriptive representation and actual political agency. Accordingly Ban mentions: "Another important issue, a major theme in the action research literature, is the salience of local structures of inequality and power Villages dominated by powerful caste groups tend to be much more dictatorial. Thus, when such villages are reserved for women one expects that the presidents would be more likely to be subservient to elites" (Ban & Rao, 2008, p.505).

The underlying issue, then, is not simply the low number of women in politics, but the absence of an enabling political environment in which women can participate autonomously and authoritatively. Genuine political empowerment requires more than entry into institutions; it requires the capacity to deliberate, negotiate, influence policy, oversee resources, and exercise public authority without male mediation. It also requires broader transformations in political culture, party organization, and social norms.

In this sense, the case of Jammu and Kashmir reveals a persistent gap between historical visibility and institutional power. Women have long been present in the symbolic and political life of the region, and they have played meaningful roles in moments of social and political transition. Yet their continued underrepresentation in formal politics, combined with the persistence of patriarchal

constraints, demonstrates that visibility should not be conflated with empowerment. A more adequate analysis must therefore distinguish between symbolic inclusion and effective participation, between the rhetoric of rights and the realities of power, and between formal representation and substantive political agency.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that women's political empowerment in India, specifically within the context of Jammu and Kashmir, remains a complex and unfinished project. While constitutional frameworks, legislative reforms, and quotas have succeeded in increasing the number of women in political institutions, this descriptive representation has not automatically translated into substantive representation. The transition from physical presence in legislative and local bodies to the actual exercise of decision-making authority is hindered by persistent structural, institutional, and cultural barriers.

At the core of this challenge is the distinction between descriptive and substantive representation (Pitkin, 1967). While descriptive representation ensures that women are numerically visible in governance, substantive representation requires that they possess the autonomy, resources, and institutional legitimacy to influence policy agendas, direct public expenditure, and challenge patriarchal power dynamics. The empirical reality of women's political participation in the region indicates that elected women often have to navigate entrenched male mediation, dynastic party structures, and institutional neglect. Consequently, numerical inclusion, though a necessary first step, is insufficient on its own to dismantle the structural inequalities that restrict women's political agency.

Ultimately, this study concludes that political empowerment is not a static legal status achieved by the passage of reservation bills, but a dynamic, contested process of reclaiming public authority. The transformative potential of women's political participation can only be realized when formal institutional openings are supported by active capacity-building, internal democratization of political parties, and a systematic dismantling of cultural biases that view leadership as a male domain. Until these foundational conditions are met, institutional quotas will continue to produce formal representation rather than the substantive, self-determined political agency required for genuine democratic governance.

Recommendations / Way Forward

Women's political empowerment in India requires a multidimensional strategy that goes beyond formal inclusion and numerical representation. While reservation policies and constitutional guarantees have expanded women's entry into political institutions, meaningful empowerment depends on whether women are able to exercise authority, influence decision-making, and participate as autonomous political actors. In this regard, the following measures are especially important.

First, capacity-building and political training should accompany women's inclusion in political institutions. Women representatives, especially at the grassroots level, often enter office without adequate access to training in governance procedures, budgeting, legal frameworks, public administration, and leadership skills. Continuous and context-sensitive training programmes are therefore essential to strengthen women's confidence, political competence, and institutional effectiveness. Such initiatives should be designed not as remedial measures, but as structural support mechanisms that address long-standing inequalities in political access and resources.

Second, political parties must play a more proactive and accountable role in advancing women's representation. Since parties act as the principal gatekeepers of political recruitment, candidate selection, and leadership promotion, gender equality cannot be achieved without internal party reform. Political parties should ensure fair nomination processes, expand leadership opportunities for women, and provide greater organizational and financial support to female candidates. This is particularly important for women from marginalized social, economic, and regional backgrounds, whose participation is often constrained by both patriarchy and party hierarchies.

Third, the constitutional and legal framework for women's representation must be implemented effectively and without unnecessary delay. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments created an important foundation for women's representation in local governance, while the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, 2023 marked a major development in extending reservation to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. However, the significance of legal reform depends on timely and transparent implementation. Political commitment must therefore focus not only on legal recognition, but also on ensuring that constitutional guarantees are translated into practical and enforceable opportunities for women's participation.

Fourth, gender-sensitive governance and institutional mainstreaming should be strengthened across all levels of policymaking. Women's political empowerment should not be confined to symbolic representation; rather, it must be reflected in policy priorities, budgetary processes, administrative structures, and local development planning. Gender-responsive budgeting, institutional accountability, and systematic consultation with women's groups can help ensure that women's representation has substantive policy consequences. In this sense, empowerment must be understood not merely as presence in office, but as the ability to shape governance outcomes.

Fifth, social and cultural transformation is indispensable for the long-term sustainability of women's political empowerment. Deeply rooted patriarchal norms continue to restrict women's mobility, public visibility, leadership legitimacy, and independent political participation. Therefore, educational institutions, media platforms, civil society organizations, and community actors should actively promote gender-equitable values and challenge stereotypes that associate politics primarily with men. Public discourse must increasingly recognize women not only as participants in politics, but as legitimate leaders, lawmakers, and decision-makers in their own right.

Sixth, mechanisms should be developed to reduce proxy representation and strengthen women's autonomous authority in office. In some contexts, elected women may face indirect control by male relatives or local elites, limiting the substantive meaning of their representation. Institutional safeguards, monitoring frameworks, and administrative transparency are necessary to ensure that women representatives can independently perform their official roles. At the same time, such measures should avoid essentialist assumptions and instead focus on protecting women's constitutional authority and decision-making capacity.

Finally, future research should move beyond descriptive representation and examine the conditions of substantive political empowerment more closely. Greater scholarly attention is needed to issues such as decision-making autonomy, influence over policy agendas, intersectional inequalities, party-level barriers, and the relationship between women's representation and governance outcomes. More reliable gender-disaggregated and intersectional data would also strengthen evidence-based policymaking and help distinguish between symbolic inclusion and meaningful political participation.

Taken together, these recommendations suggest that women's empowerment in politics cannot be secured through quotas alone. Sustainable progress requires the combined transformation of institutions, parties, law, governance practices, social norms, and research frameworks. Only through such an integrated approach can women's political participation move from formal inclusion toward substantive and effective democratic agency.

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