

"Empowered Voices: The Impact of Women's Political Participation on Policy Outcomes in India"

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Abstract:

The presence and active participation of women in the political sphere hold significant implications for policy outcomes. This research article aims to explore and analyze the impact of women's political participation on policy outcomes across various domains. Drawing on a comprehensive review of existing literature, this study examines the extent to which women's empowerment and inclusion in decision-making processes translate into tangible policy changes. The research adopts a multi-dimensional approach, encompassing both quantitative and qualitative methods. By utilizing various indicators and case studies from diverse socio-political contexts, this article seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between women's political participation and policy outcomes. Findings from the literature review demonstrate that increased women's political representation positively influences policy outcomes in areas such as gender equality, healthcare, education, social welfare, and economic development. Moreover, the inclusion of diverse perspectives and experiences contributes to more comprehensive and equitable policy frameworks. However, challenges and gaps persist, calling for continued efforts to address barriers to women's political participation, such as gender stereotypes, institutional bias, and limited access to resources. This research also sheds light on the mechanisms through which women's participation in political processes influences policy outcomes, including increased attention to gender-sensitive issues, enhanced social inclusion, and improved governance. It highlights the importance of creating enabling environments that foster women's leadership and promote their meaningful engagement in decision-making processes at various levels of government. Furthermore, this article discusses the potential implications of women's political participation and policy outcomes for broader societal transformation, including social norms, cultural shifts, and the promotion of participatory democracy. It emphasizes the need for ongoing research and collaborative efforts towards sustaining and expanding women's political empowerment, resulting in more inclusive and responsive policies that address diverse societal needs. Overall, this research article aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on women's political participation and policy outcomes. By synthesizing available evidence and providing empirical insights, it underscores the transformative potential of women's empowerment in shaping policy agendas, fostering equitable societies, and advancing democratic governance.

Keywords: women's political participation, policy outcomes, gender equality, inclusivity, governance, social transformation

Introduction

Women's political participation is increasingly recognized as a critical factor in shaping policy outcomes and promoting more inclusive and equitable societies. The unique perspectives, experiences, and priorities that women bring to the table have the potential to transform policy decisions and foster positive social change. This article, titled "Empowered Voices: The Impact of Women's Political Participation on Policy Outcomes," seeks to explore the complex relationship between women's political engagement and the resulting policy outcomes. Women play a vital role in political participation through their active involvement in decision-making processes¹. Their increased representation in political institutions and their meaningful participation contribute to policies that address gender equality, healthcare, education, social welfare, and economic development. By advocating for gender-responsive policies, women influence the formulation and implementation of policies that benefit a diverse range of individuals and communities. The impact of women's political participation extends beyond policy formulation. When women hold decision-making positions, they play a crucial role in policy implementation². Their commitment ensures that policies are effectively executed, resources are properly allocated, and gender considerations are integrated into implementation strategies. Women's participation in the implementation process enhances policy outcomes, leading to tangible improvements in society. Furthermore, women's political participation brings attention to issues that have historically been marginalized or overlooked. By actively engaging in political processes, women amplify their voices and champion causes that directly affect women's rights and social justice. Their presence challenges societal norms, dismantles discriminatory practices, and promotes gender equality³. Women in political leadership positions serve as role models, inspiring other women and girls to participate in public life and pursue leadership roles. Furthermore, Women's political participation contributes to broader social change by reshaping power dynamics and transforming societal attitudes. As women ascend to positions of influence, traditional gender roles and norms are challenged, paving the way for more inclusive and gender-responsive policies. The empowerment of women in politics encourages diverse perspectives, innovative approaches, and empathetic decision-making, leading to more effective governance and responsive policies.

Objectives:

Objective 1: To examine the relationship between women's political participation and policy outcomes across various domains, such as gender equality, healthcare, education, social welfare, and economic development.

Objective 2: To analyse the mechanisms through which women's participation in political processes influences policy outcomes, including increased attention to gender-sensitive issues, enhanced social inclusion, and improved governance.

¹ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures>

² <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/focus-areas/governance/political-participation-of-women>

³ https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/SDPB%202019-03_Political%20Participation_1.pdf

Objective 3: To identify the challenges and barriers faced by women in political participation and their implications for policy outcomes, including gender stereotypes, institutional bias, and limited access to resources.

Objective 4: To assess the potential transformative impact of women's political participation and policy outcomes on broader societal factors, such as social norms, cultural shifts, and the promotion of participatory democracy.

Historical Context in India

A. Evolution of Women's Political Rights and Empowerment

The evolution of women's political rights and empowerment in India is a complex narrative interwoven with the country's colonial past, independence movement, and post-independence era. During the British colonial period, women's issues began to gain prominence, partly due to the efforts of social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, who campaigned for women's rights, including education and the abolition of harmful practices like Sati and child marriage⁴. The early 20th century saw women's participation in the Indian freedom struggle, which significantly contributed to their political empowerment. Women like Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, and Annie Besant were actively involved in the independence movement, which provided them with a platform to voice their demands for political rights. Post-independence, the Constitution of India, adopted in 1950, laid a robust foundation for gender equality. It granted women the right to vote and guaranteed equality before the law. Various legislative measures were introduced to protect and empower women, such as the Hindu Code Bills (1955-56), which reformed personal laws concerning marriage, inheritance, and adoption to ensure women's rights⁵.

B. Milestones in Gender Equality Movements

Several milestones mark the gender equality movement in India. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed the rise of the women's movement, which focused on issues such as dowry deaths, workplace harassment, and violence against women. The Committee on the Status of Women in India (1974) published a seminal report, "Towards Equality," which highlighted the widespread discrimination against women and became a crucial document for policy advocacy.

In 1993, the National Commission for Women (NCW) was established to review constitutional and legal safeguards for women, recommend remedial legislative measures, and facilitate redressal of grievances. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992-93) were landmark achievements, mandating a one-third reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (rural local bodies) and Municipalities. This legislative change significantly increased women's political participation at the grassroots level, empowering them to take active roles in local governance. More recently, the Women's Reservation Bill, which proposes reserving 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of Parliament) and state legislative assemblies for women, has been a significant focus of gender equality advocacy.

⁴https://nhrc.nic.in/sites/default/files/Women%E2%80%99s%20Rights%20in%20India%20complete_compressed.pdf

⁵https://nhrc.nic.in/sites/default/files/Women%E2%80%99s%20Rights%20in%20India%20complete_compressed.pdf

Although not yet passed, it symbolizes ongoing efforts to enhance women's political representation⁶.

C. Challenges Faced by Women in Political Participation

Despite these advancements, women in India continue to face numerous challenges in political participation. **Socio-cultural Barriers:** Traditional gender roles and patriarchal norms often restrict women's political engagement. In many regions, societal expectations confine women to domestic roles, discouraging them from pursuing political careers.

Economic Barriers: Women generally have less access to financial resources, which are crucial for funding electoral campaigns. This economic disparity limits their ability to compete effectively in elections. Additionally, women often juggle multiple responsibilities, including unpaid domestic and care work, which reduces their availability for political activities.

Political and Structural Barriers: Within political parties, women often face discrimination and are less likely to be nominated for electoral contests. Male-dominated networks and patronage systems can exclude women from decision-making processes. Moreover, the lack of internal democracy within parties can further marginalize women⁷.

Violence and Intimidation: Women in politics frequently face violence, harassment, and intimidation, both online and offline. This includes threats to personal safety and character assassination, aimed at discouraging them from participating in political life. Such violence undermines women's confidence and deters their active engagement in politics.

Policy and Implementation Gaps: While there are numerous laws and policies aimed at promoting gender equality, the implementation often falls short. Corruption, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and lack of political will can hinder the effective enforcement of these measures, limiting their impact on women's political empowerment. The historical context of women's political rights and empowerment in India reveals significant progress over the years, but also highlights persistent challenges. Addressing socio-cultural, economic, political, and structural barriers, and ensuring a safe and supportive environment for women in politics, are crucial steps towards achieving genuine gender equality in political participation.

Women's Political Participation: Statistics and Trends in India

A. Global Overview of Women's Representation in Politics

Globally, women's representation in politics has seen a steady increase over the past few decades, yet significant disparities remain. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), women constitute approximately 26.7% of national parliaments worldwide. The Nordic countries lead with the highest representation, averaging around 45%, while regions such as the Middle East and North Africa lag behind at about 18%⁸.

⁶ https://cbpbu.ac.in/userfiles/file/2020/STUDY_MAT/POL_SC/73rd%20and%2074th-converted.pdf

⁷ <https://www.monash.edu/news/articles/the-barriers-women-face-to-enter-politics-in-india>

⁸ <https://www.orfonline.org/research/women-s-representation-in-india-s-parliament-measuring-progress-analysing-obstacles>

Women's Representation by Region

Region	Percentage of Women in Parliaments
Nordic Countries	45%
Europe	32%
Americas	31%
Sub-Saharan Africa	24%
Asia	20%
Middle East and North Africa	18%
World Average	26.7%

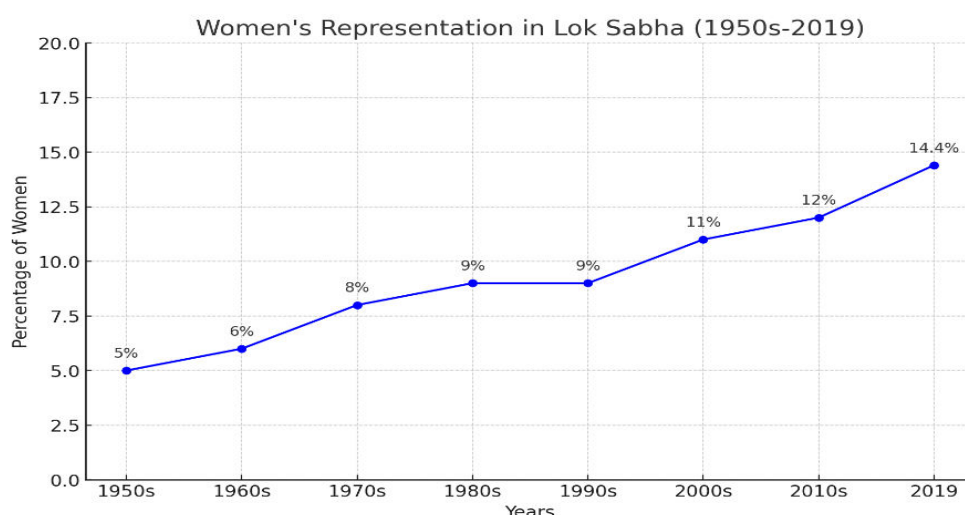
Sources: <https://www.ipu.org/>

B. Regional Variations and Disparities in Women's Political Participation in India

India presents a varied landscape in terms of women's political participation, with significant regional disparities. The representation of women in the national parliament (Lok Sabha) has gradually increased from 5% in the 1950s to 14.4% in 2019. However, this figure still falls short of the global average. At the state level, disparities are stark. States such as West Bengal, Bihar, and Rajasthan have implemented successful initiatives to increase women's participation in local governance, partly due to the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, which mandate 33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies. As a result, states like Bihar and Rajasthan have over 50% women representatives in Panchayats⁹.

Conversely, states in the north-eastern region, such as Nagaland and Manipur, show much lower levels of women's political representation. Socio-cultural norms and lack of awareness and enforcement of gender equality measures contribute to these disparities.

The graph above shows the steady increase in women's representation in the Lok Sabha (the



⁹ Dhavan, R. (2008). Reservations for Women: The Way Forward. *National Law School of India Review*, 20(1), 1–45.

lower house of India's Parliament) from the 1950s to 2019. Over these decades, the percentage of women in the Lok Sabha has grown from 5% in the 1950s to 14.4% in 2019.

Women's Representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions Across Indian States

Kerala	52.41
Madhya Pradesh	49.99
Maharashtra	53.47
Manipur	50.69
Odisha	52.68
Punjab	41.79
Rajasthan	51.31
Sikkim	50.3
Tamil Nadu	52.98
Telangana	50.34
Tripura	45.23
Uttar Pradesh	33.34
Uttarakhand	56.01
West Bengal	51.42

Sources: <https://www.ipu.org/>

Top Performing States:

Uttarakhand (56.01%): This state has the highest percentage of elected women representatives in Panchayats, indicating strong gender representation¹⁰. Chhattisgarh (54.78%): Chhattisgarh is close behind, showcasing significant gender inclusivity. Assam (54.6%): Assam also demonstrates a high level of female representation.

States with Over 50% Representation:

Bihar (52.2%), Kerala (52.41%), Maharashtra (53.47%), Manipur (50.69%), Odisha (52.68%)
Rajasthan (51.31%), Tamil Nadu (52.98%), West Bengal (51.42%)

These states show that more than half of their Panchayat representatives are women, which reflects progressive gender policies and possibly effective implementation of reservations for women¹¹.

States with Close to 50% Representation:

Andhra Pradesh (50%), Himachal Pradesh (50.12%), Jharkhand (51.57%), Karnataka (50.05%), Sikkim (50.3%), Telangana (50.34%)

These states are also doing well, with representation at or just above 50%, indicating compliance with gender reservation norms¹².

¹⁰ https://www.orfonline.org/research/elected-women-representatives-in-local-rural-governments-in-india-assessing-the-impact-and-challenges#_ftn5

¹¹ https://www.orfonline.org/research/elected-women-representatives-in-local-rural-governments-in-india-assessing-the-impact-and-challenges#_ftn5

¹² https://www.orfonline.org/research/elected-women-representatives-in-local-rural-governments-in-india-assessing-the-impact-and-challenges#_ftn5

States with Moderate Representation (40-50%):

Gujarat (49.96%), Madhya Pradesh (49.99%), Haryana (42.12%), Punjab (41.79%) Tripura (45.23%), These states have moderate representation of women in Panchayats. They may need to improve policies or their implementation to increase female participation.

States with Low Representation (below 40%):

Arunachal Pradesh (38.98%), Goa (36.72%), Jammu and Kashmir (33.18%), Uttar Pradesh (33.34%) These states have the lowest percentage of women representatives in Panchayats. They might need to reassess their strategies for increasing women's representation and participation in local governance.

Observations:

- ❖ High Representation in Tribal and Northeastern States: States like Chhattisgarh and Assam show high representation of women, possibly due to effective implementation of reservation policies and cultural factors.
- ❖ Variability Across Regions: There is significant variability in women's representation across different states, reflecting varying levels of policy effectiveness, cultural attitudes, and socio-economic factors.
- ❖ Need for Targeted Interventions: States with low percentages might benefit from targeted interventions to address barriers to women's participation in Panchayats.

Impact on Policy Formulation and Implementation

The increasing percentage of elected women representatives in Panchayats across Indian states has significant implications for policy formulation and implementation. The presence of women in local governance brings diverse perspectives and prioritizes issues that may have been previously overlooked, fostering more inclusive and comprehensive policy agendas¹³.

Influence of Women's Voices in Policy Agendas

Women representatives often bring attention to issues such as health, education, sanitation, and welfare, which directly impact their communities. Their involvement ensures that policies address the needs of all constituents, including marginalized groups. For instance, in states like Kerala and Bihar, where women's representation is over 50%, there has been a noticeable shift towards policies that emphasize social development and welfare. This shift can be attributed to women's advocacy for improved healthcare facilities, educational opportunities, and social security measures. Their unique perspectives and life experiences enable them to identify and address gaps in existing policies, leading to more balanced and equitable policy frameworks¹⁴.

Analysis of Gender-Responsive Policies and Their Drivers

Gender-responsive policies, driven by increased female representation, focus on promoting gender equality and empowering women. These policies often include measures such as women's safety initiatives, schemes for economic empowerment, and gender-sensitive budgeting. The drivers behind these policies include the active participation of women in decision-making roles and the political will to implement gender quotas in local governance. States like Chhattisgarh and Tamil Nadu have implemented various gender-responsive

¹³ <https://india.unfpa.org/en/news/opinion-key-fast-track-indias-progress-more-women-local-bodies>

¹⁴ <https://india.unfpa.org/en/news/opinion-key-fast-track-indias-progress-more-women-local-bodies>

policies, leading to significant improvements in women's socio-economic status. The success of these policies highlights the importance of women's participation in governance as a crucial driver for gender equality and social progress.

Case Studies Demonstrating Policy Outcomes Influenced by Women's Empowerment

Several case studies illustrate the positive outcomes of policies influenced by women's empowerment. In Rajasthan, for example, the introduction of the “Balika Samridhi Yojana” was largely driven by women representatives. This scheme aimed at improving the educational status of girls and reducing gender disparity in education. Similarly, in Assam, women Panchayat leaders played a pivotal role in implementing the “Swachh Bharat Abhiyan,” focusing on improving sanitation facilities in rural areas. These case studies demonstrate that when women are empowered to participate in governance, they can significantly influence policy outcomes that benefit the entire community¹⁵.

Impact on Policy Implementation

The role of women in policy implementation processes is equally crucial. Their active participation ensures that policies are executed effectively, considering the local context and needs.

Role of Women in Policy Implementation Processes

Women representatives often act as a bridge between the government and the community, facilitating better communication and trust. Their involvement in policy implementation processes ensures that the policies are more likely to be accepted and supported by the community. For example, in states like West Bengal and Karnataka, women leaders have been instrumental in mobilizing communities to participate in development programs, ensuring that the policies reach the grassroots level effectively.

Contributions to Effective Resource Allocation and Program Execution

Women in governance contribute to more effective resource allocation and program execution by prioritizing transparency and accountability. They are often more attuned to the needs of their communities and can ensure that resources are allocated where they are most needed. This approach has been evident in states like Maharashtra and Odisha, where women representatives have ensured that funds for education and healthcare are utilized efficiently, leading to tangible improvements in these sectors¹⁶.

Case Studies Illustrating Women's Influence on Policy Implementation Outcomes

Case studies from Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh highlight the positive impact of women on policy implementation. In Uttarakhand, women leaders have successfully implemented water management programs, addressing the critical issue of water scarcity in rural areas. Their efforts have led to the sustainable use of water resources and improved access to clean water for the community. In Himachal Pradesh, women representatives have played a key role in implementing agricultural development programs, supporting local farmers with training and resources. These initiatives have resulted in increased agricultural productivity and improved livelihoods for rural families.

¹⁵https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340255831_Do_Social_Policies_Improve_Choices_for_Women_in_India

¹⁶https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340255831_Do_Social_Policies_Improve_Choices_for_Women_in_India

Overcoming Challenges and Barriers

The path to achieving substantial representation of women in Panchayats has not been without challenges. Various barriers hinder women's political participation, ranging from socio-cultural to institutional obstacles.

Identification of Barriers Hindering Women's Political Participation

Women face numerous barriers that impede their political participation. Socio-cultural norms and traditional gender roles often restrict women to domestic responsibilities, limiting their public engagement. Patriarchal attitudes and the lack of support from family and community can discourage women from pursuing political roles. Additionally, women often lack access to education and information about political processes, reducing their preparedness and confidence to participate. Institutional barriers, such as discriminatory practices within political parties and the absence of gender-sensitive policies, further complicate their involvement in politics. Financial constraints also play a significant role, as campaigning and participating in elections require resources that many women do not have¹⁷.

Strategies for Enhancing Women's Empowerment and Overcoming Obstacles

Addressing these barriers requires comprehensive strategies that empower women and create an enabling environment for their political participation. Education and capacity-building programs are crucial for equipping women with the knowledge and skills necessary for political engagement. These programs should focus on leadership training, understanding political processes, and effective communication skills. Legal and policy reforms are essential to ensure gender equality within political systems. Implementing and enforcing gender quotas can provide women with guaranteed representation and opportunities. Financial support and resources for women candidates can help mitigate economic barriers. Additionally, promoting mentorship programs where experienced women leaders guide and support new entrants can be highly effective¹⁸.

Promoting Inclusive and Supportive Environments for Women in Politics

Creating an inclusive and supportive environment is vital for sustaining women's participation in politics. This includes fostering a culture of respect and equality within political institutions and communities. Public awareness campaigns can challenge and change patriarchal attitudes and stereotypes, promoting the acceptance of women in leadership roles. Encouraging male allies to support gender equality initiatives and advocate for women's participation can also make a significant difference. Policies that ensure work-life balance, such as flexible meeting times and provisions for childcare, can help women manage their dual responsibilities. Providing platforms for women to network, share experiences, and collectively address challenges can strengthen their political engagement¹⁹.

Broader Social Implications

Gender Equality and Social Transformation: Increased participation of women in politics challenges traditional gender roles, empowers women, and fosters a more equitable society.

¹⁷ https://pria.org/knowledge_resource/1533206139_Women%E2%80%99s%20Leadership%20in%20Panchayati%20Raj%20Institutions.pdf

¹⁸ https://pria.org/knowledge_resource/1533206139_Women%E2%80%99s%20Leadership%20in%20Panchayati%20Raj%20Institutions.pdf

¹⁹ http://nirdpr.org.in/nird_docs/casestudies/cord/cord1.pdf

Their presence in decision-making positions leads to policies that address gender disparities and promote women's rights, impacting economic, social, and cultural domains.

Impact on Social Norms and Cultural Shifts: The visibility of women in leadership roles inspires more women to pursue political and leadership positions, gradually changing societal attitudes towards gender roles and women's capabilities. This cultural shift is crucial for long-term gender equality.

Conclusion

The impact of women's political participation on policy outcomes in India is profound and multifaceted. This research demonstrates that the increased representation of women in Panchayats and other political institutions significantly influences policy agendas, implementation processes, and broader social dynamics. Women bring unique perspectives and priorities to decision-making, leading to more inclusive and comprehensive policies, particularly in areas such as gender equality, healthcare, education, social welfare, and economic development. The presence of women in political roles not only enhances the quality of governance but also drives social transformation by challenging traditional gender roles and promoting gender equality. The case studies and statistics presented in this article highlight the positive outcomes of women's empowerment in politics, including improved resource allocation, effective policy implementation, and the introduction of gender-responsive policies. However, despite these advancements, women in India still face numerous challenges in political participation, including socio-cultural norms, economic barriers, and institutional biases. Addressing these obstacles requires concerted efforts through education, capacity-building, legal reforms, and the creation of supportive environments that foster women's leadership and participation. Ultimately, the continued empowerment of women in politics is essential for advancing democratic governance and achieving a more equitable society. Ongoing research, advocacy, and collaborative efforts are crucial to sustaining and expanding women's political representation, ensuring that policy outcomes reflect the diverse needs and perspectives of all citizens. This transformation will not only benefit women but also contribute to the overall development and progress of the nation.

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