



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF TRENDS IN EMERGING RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

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Volume 3; Issue 3; 2025; Page No. 133-135

Received: 02-03-2025
Accepted: 09-04-2025

Role of Women in Indian Political Parties: Historical Development and Contemporary Challenges

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16610342>

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Abstract

This research article examines the historical evolution and current challenges faced by women in Indian political parties. Despite constitutional guarantees and increased political awareness, women's representation in party leadership and policymaking remains minimal. Drawing upon Feminist Political Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and Intersectionality, this paper explores women's participation in electoral politics, policy influence, and leadership structures. It provides a chronological analysis from the nationalist movement to post-independence India and addresses ongoing barriers such as gender bias, patriarchal norms, tokenism, and lack of institutional support. The article concludes by advocating structural reforms and inclusive political frameworks to ensure substantive gender equality.

Keywords: Women in politics, Indian political parties, gender and leadership, electoral bias, feminist political theory, intersectionality, gender parity, policy influence, political empowerment, patriarchy in politics

1. Introduction

The role of women in Indian political parties is shaped by a multifaceted and evolving interplay of historical legacies, ideological frameworks, entrenched social norms, and deeply embedded power structures. Women's engagement in formal political institutions, particularly within party organizations, has been both symbolically significant and structurally limited. While India has produced iconic and powerful female political leaders such as Indira Gandhi, who served as the country's first and only female Prime Minister for over a decade, and regional stalwarts like Jayalalithaa, Mayawati, and Mamata Banerjee, such examples often represent exceptional trajectories rather than the norm. These individual successes, although highly visible, tend to obscure the broader patterns of exclusion, marginalization, and underrepresentation of women within mainstream political processes and party hierarchies. Despite constituting nearly 50% of India's population and

playing active roles in electoral participation-as voters, campaigners, and grassroots mobilizers-women continue to be grossly underrepresented in legislative bodies. As of 2024, their representation in the Lok Sabha remains below 15%, a figure that starkly contrasts with their demographic presence and civic engagement. This underrepresentation is even more pronounced in state assemblies, local governance committees of political parties, and crucial policymaking bodies, including parliamentary boards and central election committees. Political parties across the spectrum have often failed to implement internal mechanisms that promote gender parity, resulting in limited opportunities for women to ascend to leadership roles or influence party agendas meaningfully. This systemic disparity calls for a critical and nuanced examination of the historical development of women's participation in Indian political parties, the socio-political barriers they continue to face, and the ideological contradictions within party systems that claim to support

equality yet perpetuate patriarchal structures. It is essential to analyze how factors such as caste, class, religion, and region intersect with gender to further complicate women's political inclusion. An in-depth understanding of these dynamics is crucial not only to document the evolution of women's political engagement but also to identify pathways for transformative change toward a more inclusive and equitable democratic framework.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Feminist Political Theory

Feminist political theory critiques traditional political thought that marginalizes or omits women's political roles. Scholars like Carole Pateman and Iris Marion Young emphasize the structural patriarchy embedded within political institutions (Pateman, 1988; Young, 2000) ^[1, 2].

2.2 Intersectionality

Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality underscores how caste, class, religion, and regional identities intersect with gender to shape the political experiences of Indian women (Crenshaw, 1989) ^[3].

2.3 Postcolonial Feminism

Postcolonial feminist thinkers argue that Indian women's political identity is shaped by colonial legacies and indigenous traditions (Mohanty, 1988) ^[4]. This framework helps contextualize the hybrid nature of Indian women's political engagement.

3. Historical Evolution of Women's Role in Indian Political Parties

3.1 Pre-Independence Period

The Indian freedom movement offered an initial platform for women to engage politically. Organizations like the All India Women's Conference (1927) and women leaders such as Sarojini Naidu and Aruna Asaf Ali played a significant role in nationalist politics. Women participated in mass protests, the Civil Disobedience Movement, and the Quit India Movement, asserting political agency (Forbes, 1996) ^[5].

3.2 Post-Independence to 1970s

Post-independence, political inclusion of women was formalized through constitutional provisions (Articles 14, 15, and 16) ensuring equality. However, women's actual presence in party structures remained symbolic. The rise of Indira Gandhi to the Prime Ministerial position in 1966 was significant but did not translate into systemic inclusion of women in party leadership (Kishwar, 1996) ^[6].

3.3 1980s to 2000s: Rise of Regional Parties and Tokenism

The political liberalization of the 1980s and the rise of regional parties offered new opportunities. Women leaders like Mayawati (BSP), Mamata Banerjee (TMC), and Jayalalitha (AIADMK) emerged. However, many female politicians were seen as political inheritors or tokens rather than leaders with autonomous policy influence (Rai, 2002) ^[7].

4. Contemporary Landscape and Gender Bias in Electoral Politics

4.1 Current Representation

As of 2024, women constitute approximately 14.4% of MPs in Lok Sabha, and fewer hold key ministerial or party positions. Party tickets granted to women remain disproportionately low, with only a few parties adopting internal gender quotas (Lok Sabha Secretariat, 2023) ^[10].

4.2 Structural Barriers

Patriarchal Norms: Male-dominated party structures often marginalize women.

Electoral Violence and Harassment: Many women face intimidation, trolling, and gender-based violence in campaigns.

Lack of Financial and Institutional Support: Women often lack access to resources needed for electoral competition (Deshpande, 2020) ^[9].

4.3 Internal Democracy and Gender Tokenism

Political parties rarely promote internal democracy, and women's wings within parties are often peripheral with limited decision-making powers. While parties like the Congress, CPI(M), and AAP maintain women's cells, they are seldom given strategic policy roles (Basu, 2016) ^[8].

5. Policy Influence and Leadership Roles

While some women hold significant leadership roles, their influence on party ideology and policymaking is minimal. Decision-making bodies like parliamentary boards, central election committees, and policy think-tanks within parties lack substantial female representation.

Example: In BJP and Congress, the proportion of women in top-tier committees remains below 10% (PRS Legislative Research, 2023) ^[11].

6. Case Studies

6.1 Trinamool Congress (TMC)

Under Mamata Banerjee, TMC has fielded a high number of women candidates, yet decision-making remains centralized. Her leadership model reflects a blend of populism and charisma with limited institutional gender democratization.

6.2 Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)

Despite a progressive image, AAP has been criticized for gender tokenism. The party's 2020 Delhi election campaign featured very few women candidates or leaders in strategic positions.

7. Women's Reservation Bill: An Unfulfilled Promise

The 33% Women's Reservation Bill, first introduced in 1996, remains stalled in Parliament. Most major political parties express rhetorical support but fail to take concrete action. The Bill's passage would significantly alter the gender dynamics within party systems.

8. Strategies for Inclusive Political Participation

Gender Quotas Within Parties: Like the Scandinavian

model, internal party quotas can ensure gender balance.
 Leadership Training and Mentorship: Structured capacity-building for young female politicians.
 Campaign Finance Reforms: Earmarked funds for women candidates to address resource disparity.
 Digital Safety Policies: To curb online harassment of female politicians.

9. Conclusion

The role of women in Indian political parties continues to be severely constrained by a range of entrenched structural and cultural barriers, foremost among them being the persistence of deep-rooted patriarchal norms that dominate political institutions and party organizations. These gendered power structures often marginalize women, relegating them to peripheral roles within party hierarchies, such as members of women's wings or cultural committees, rather than promoting them into central leadership or decision-making positions. Tokenistic representation further compounds the problem, as political parties frequently project a commitment to gender equality through the symbolic inclusion of a few high-profile female leaders, while failing to build a supportive ecosystem for widespread female participation. This superficial engagement with gender issues masks the lack of genuine effort toward meaningful structural reform. Genuine political inclusion of women is not merely a matter of representational justice; it is a democratic imperative. Women bring unique perspectives, priorities, and leadership styles that can enrich governance, policy formulation, and social welfare. Their active involvement in politics leads to more inclusive, equitable, and responsive democratic institutions. In this context, there is a pressing need to reconceptualize political participation and leadership through a feminist lens—one that challenges existing hierarchies, advocates for institutional accountability, and envisions party politics as a space of collaboration, equality, and social transformation. Only through such a re-imagining can the constitutional promise of equality, justice, and dignity for all citizens be truly realized in India's democratic polity.

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