

ADVANCING GENDER-INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY: CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN INDIA WITH REFERENCE TO THE WOMEN'S RESERVATION BILL AND RECENT ELECTORAL REFORMS

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1. INTRODUCTION

India proudly calls itself the world's largest democracy, yet there's an uncomfortable truth we can't ignore: our Parliament doesn't look like India. Women make up nearly half our population, but walk into the Lok Sabha and you'll struggle to find even 15% women representatives. This glaring gap between our democratic ideals and ground reality raises some hard questions about whether our democracy truly represents all of us.

When our Constitution was drafted in 1950, it promised equality for everyone. Articles 14, 15, and 16 explicitly guaranteed that gender wouldn't be a barrier to opportunity. Article 15(3) even empowered the State to take special steps for women and children. On paper, everything looked perfect. But somehow, seventy-five years later, women's voices remain conspicuously absent from the halls of power where decisions affecting their lives are made daily.

There was a moment of hope in 1992. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments changed the game for women in local governance, mandating one-third reservation in Panchayats and municipalities. Overnight, India created over a million elected women representatives at the grassroots level. It wasn't perfect—we saw challenges like husbands operating as 'remote controls' for their wives in office—but it proved that women could lead when given the chance.

The obvious next step? Extend this reservation to state assemblies and Parliament. Simple, right? Not quite. What followed was a 27-year saga that perfectly illustrates how difficult meaningful change can be. The Women's Reservation Bill was first introduced in 1996. It was blocked, shelved, reintroduced, debated endlessly, and finally—finally—passed in September 2023 as the 128th Constitutional Amendment. The journey from 1996 to 2023 tells us as much about Indian politics as the bill itself.

Now here's the thing: the 128th Amendment reserves 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies for women. It's historic, no doubt. But will it actually change women's lives in politics? The bill links implementation to delimitation and census—bureaucratic processes that could delay things further. There

are questions about how the rotation of reserved seats will work, whether women will have genuine autonomy or serve as proxies for male relatives, and how we'll ensure women from marginalized communities aren't left behind again.

Meanwhile, India's electoral landscape has been changing in other ways too. We've seen the introduction of NOTA, debates over Electoral Bonds, the adoption of EVMs and VVPATs, and new rules about campaign finance and criminal candidates. Each of these reforms affects women candidates differently—often in ways we haven't fully recognized or addressed.

This research digs into these complexities. It asks uncomfortable questions about why it took us so long to get here, whether legal fixes alone can solve deeply cultural problems, and what we need to do to ensure that reservation translates into real power for women, not just symbolic presence. Drawing on constitutional law, empirical data from the grassroots experience, international examples, and the messy reality of Indian politics, this study examines what it will really take to make our democracy gender-inclusive—not just in theory, but in practice.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Let's be blunt: Indian democracy has a serious representation problem. Despite all our constitutional guarantees, women hold barely 15% of Lok Sabha seats and around 9% in the Rajya Sabha. Globally, we rank embarrassingly low on women's parliamentary representation. This isn't just a numbers game—it reflects something deeper about who gets to make decisions in our country and whose voices matter.

The problem is like a jigsaw puzzle where every piece is broken. Start with the Constitution—beautifully egalitarian on paper, yet it took 73 years to mandate reservation for women in higher legislatures. Then there's the 27-year gap between first proposing the Women's Reservation Bill and actually passing it. That delay itself is revealing about how seriously we take women's political rights.

But the legal framework is just one piece. Indian society, for all its progress, remains deeply patriarchal. Women face family and community pressure against entering politics, which is still

seen as a 'man's world.' They struggle to raise campaign funds because they have less access to money and business networks. Political parties, despite public statements supporting women's empowerment, rarely field women candidates in winnable seats. When women do enter politics, they face harassment, threats, and violence that male politicians simply don't encounter.

The grassroots experience shows us both promise and problems. Yes, reservation at the Panchayat level brought women into politics. But dig deeper and you find the 'sarpanch pati' phenomenon—husbands who effectively run things while their wives serve as figureheads. Women representatives often lack training, face resistance from male colleagues, and struggle to assert their authority.

Now we have the 128th Amendment—a major achievement. But it comes with its own complications. The implementation is tied to delimitation and census processes that could postpone actual change indefinitely. How will the rotation of reserved constituencies work without causing political chaos? How do we ensure that the one-third reservation for SC/ST women within the larger reservation doesn't become tokenistic? What prevents the proxy representation we've seen at the local level from repeating in Parliament?

Add to this the impact of recent electoral reforms. Campaign finance rules, while aimed at transparency, can hurt women candidates who already struggle to raise funds. Measures against criminalization of politics, though important, are applied in contexts where women face different types of political violence than men. Technology in elections assumes digital literacy and access that many women, especially in rural areas, don't have.

At its core, this research tackles a fundamental question: Can legal interventions alone—however well-intentioned—dismantle the deeply entrenched barriers that keep women out of political power? Or do we need something more comprehensive, something

that addresses the social, economic, and cultural dimensions alongside the legal ones? The 128th Amendment gives us a historic opportunity, but only if we're honest about what it can and cannot achieve by itself.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How has India's constitutional and legal framework for women's political participation evolved from Independence to today? This traces the journey from the Constitution's equality promises through the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the recently passed 128th Amendment, examining what changed, what didn't, and why.
2. What actually keeps women out of Indian politics? Beyond legal barriers, what role do social attitudes, economic constraints, party politics, violence against women candidates, and intersecting disadvantages based on caste and class play in limiting women's political participation?
3. What does the Women's Reservation Bill (128th Amendment) really do, and what are its limitations? Looking beyond the celebratory headlines, what are the practical challenges in implementing 33% reservation? How will rotation work? What about the sub-quota for SC/ST women? When will it actually come into effect?
4. What can we learn from 30+ years of reservation in Panchayats and municipalities? Has it empowered women or just created proxy representation? What worked, what didn't, and how can those lessons inform implementation at state and national levels?
5. How do India's electoral reforms affect women differently than men? Do campaign finance rules, technology

adoption, or measures against criminalization create additional barriers or opportunities for women candidates and voters?

6. What can India learn from other countries' experiences with gender quotas? Countries like Rwanda, Sweden, and Argentina have dramatically increased women's representation—what did they do right, what challenges did they face, and what's transferable to the Indian context?

4. COURSE OBJECTIVES

This research aims to:

1. Map out the complete constitutional and legal landscape governing women's political participation in India, identifying both the strong points and the gaps that need attention.
2. Understand the real, on-ground barriers that keep women out of politics—moving beyond generalizations to examine how social norms, money, party structures, violence, and intersectional disadvantages create multiple, reinforcing obstacles.
3. Critically analyse the Women's Reservation Bill—what it promises, what challenges it faces, and what needs to happen to ensure it delivers meaningful change rather than just symbolic representation.
4. Learn from the Panchayat and municipality experience with reservation—understanding what worked, what went wrong, and how those lessons can guide implementation at higher levels of government.
5. Examine how electoral reforms impact women's political participation, both as candidates and voters, identifying reforms that help and those that inadvertently create new barriers.

6. Study what other countries have done to increase women's political representation, separating the genuinely useful lessons from context-specific approaches that won't work in India's complex, diverse democracy.
7. Develop practical, evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, political parties, civil society, and women's groups on how to make the promise of gender-inclusive democracy a reality.

5. HYPOTHESIS

This research tests the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1:

The Women's Reservation Bill is necessary but not sufficient. While legal mandates can force open doors that have been closed to women, they can't by themselves change the deeper social, economic, and political structures that keep women marginalized. Without complementary reforms addressing patriarchal attitudes, resource disparities, party resistance, and cultural barriers, reservation might create female faces in Parliament without creating genuine female power.

Hypothesis 2:

The Panchayat experience is a cautionary tale as much as a success story. Reservation at the local level proved that women can lead, but it also revealed that putting women in office doesn't automatically give them decision-making power. The challenges we saw—proxy representation, lack of training, male resistance, limited autonomy—won't magically disappear at higher levels. Unless we proactively address these issues, state assemblies and Parliament could replicate the same problems we've seen in village councils.

Hypothesis 3:

Electoral reforms, despite good intentions, haven't been designed with women's specific challenges in mind. Rules about campaign finance, for instance, affect women candidates

differently because they start with less access to money. Technology-focused reforms assume digital literacy and access that many women lack. The criminalization measures don't account for the different types of political violence women face. In short, gender-blind reforms often have gender-biased outcomes, creating new obstacles while solving other problems.

6. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholars have been wrestling with questions about women's political participation in India for decades, approaching the issue from multiple angles. This review organizes the existing work thematically while identifying where our knowledge is still incomplete.

Understanding the Constitutional Promise and Its Limits

Granville Austin's classic work on the Indian Constitution laid the groundwork for understanding what the framers envisioned about equality. Constitutional scholars like Lotika Sarkar and Upendra Baxi have documented how our Constitution's equality guarantees looked beautiful on paper but faced real-world obstacles in implementation. The 73rd and 74th Amendments generated substantial research, with George Mathew and Niraja Gopal Jayal examining how local government reservation actually worked. Legal experts have debated whether reservations violate the Constitution's basic structure or represent legitimate affirmative action—a conversation that continues today.

The Long Road to the Women's Reservation Bill

The 27-year journey of the Women's Reservation Bill has been extensively chronicled by scholars like Kalpana Sharma, Zoya Hasan, and Ritu Menon. They've traced the political negotiations, the parliamentary drama, and the resistance from various quarters. Women's movements advocating for the bill have been studied by Radha Kumar and Raka Ray, who show how activists balanced demands for representation

with concerns about tokenism. These works reveal the messy reality of legislative change—it's never just about writing good laws; it's about navigating competing interests, fears, and power dynamics.

What Actually Happened in Panchayats

Some of the most interesting research has come from studying what happened when women got reservation at the local level. Raghendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo showed that women leaders prioritize different things than men—more drinking water facilities and better roads near where women actually walk, for instance. But researchers like Bina Agarwal and Sumi Krishna revealed the darker side: the 'sarpanch pati' phenomenon where husbands call the shots, women facing social pressure and ostracism, and limited real decision-making power despite holding office.

State-specific studies from West Bengal, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan show that context matters enormously. Literacy levels, social structure, how strong local civil society is—all these factors shape whether reservation empowers women or just puts them in impossible positions.

Understanding Why It's So Hard for Women to Enter Politics

Scholars from different fields have identified overlapping barriers. Sociologists like Leela Kasturi and Vina Mazumdar document how patriarchal norms keep women out. Economists studying campaign finance show how women's limited access to money becomes a political barrier. Political scientists including Asha Sarangi and Sudha Pai examine how party structures resist women's entry. Organizations like the Centre for Social Research have documented violence against women in politics—something that rarely makes headlines but shapes women's political choices profoundly.

Increasingly, scholars like Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege are examining intersectionality—how being a Dalit woman or an Adivasi woman

creates compounded disadvantages that being just a woman or just Dalit doesn't fully capture.

Electoral Reforms Through a Gender Lens

Electoral reform literature has traditionally been gender-blind. Work by scholars and former election officials like S.Y. Quraishi discusses various reforms but often without asking how they affect women differently. This is changing, with newer scholarship beginning to examine how campaign finance rules, technology adoption, and measures against criminalization impact women candidates and voters in specific ways.

Learning from Other Countries

Global research on gender quotas offers valuable comparative perspectives. Scholars like Drude Dahlerup, Mona Lena Krook, and Pippa Norris have studied different quota models worldwide—from Rwanda's remarkable achievement of over 60% women in Parliament to Scandinavian voluntary party quotas to Latin American constitutional mandates. These studies show what's possible but also remind us that what works in one context doesn't automatically transfer to another.

Where the Gaps Remain

Despite all this scholarship, significant gaps remain. There's limited integrated analysis that brings together constitutional law, ground-level empirical evidence, and policy implementation. The differential impact of electoral reforms on women needs systematic study. We need deeper intersectional analysis of how reservation affects women across caste, class, and regional lines. And of course, since the 128th Amendment just passed, we're only beginning to study its actual implementation and effects.

This research addresses these gaps by examining the constitutional, legal, and practical dimensions together, looking at how the Women's Reservation Bill interacts with other electoral reforms, and proposing evidence-based recommendations for making gender-inclusive democracy real rather than just rhetorical.

7. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research combines different approaches to get a complete picture. Think of it as using multiple lenses to examine the same complex reality—each lens reveals something the others might miss.

The Overall Approach

The research uses a mixed-methods design that combines legal analysis, historical examination, empirical investigation, and comparative study. It's primarily qualitative but incorporates quantitative data where relevant, especially when analyzing electoral trends and representation patterns.

What Sources We're Using

The research draws on primary sources including the Constitution itself, constitutional amendments (especially the 73rd, 74th, and 128th), parliamentary debates, committee reports, Supreme Court and High Court judgments, Election Commission data, Census information, and government policy documents.

Secondary sources include academic books and journal articles, doctoral dissertations, research reports from organizations like UN Women and the World Bank, civil society documentation, and media coverage of the Women's Reservation Bill and electoral reforms.

How We're Analyzing Everything

Constitutional and legal analysis examines what the law says, what it means, and how courts have interpreted it. This includes detailed study of the 128th Amendment's provisions, its consistency with constitutional principles, and potential implementation challenges.

Historical analysis traces how we got here—from Constituent Assembly debates through 75 years of independent India's democracy. Understanding this history helps explain why certain reforms happened when they did (or didn't happen for decades).

Empirical analysis looks at the numbers—how many women have been elected over time, from which parties, from which constituencies, with what success rates. It also examines qualitative data from parliamentary debates, policy documents, and implementation reports.

Comparative analysis studies what happened in other countries—Rwanda, Sweden, Argentina, South Africa, Nepal—when they adopted gender quotas. The goal isn't to copy what they did, but to learn from their successes and failures while recognizing that India's context is unique.

Being Honest About Limitations

This study has some built-in limitations. The 128th Amendment hasn't been implemented yet, so we're working partly with projections based on local government experiences and international examples rather than actual data from state assemblies and Parliament. Access to detailed implementation data from all states may be limited. The study is primarily desk-based rather than involving extensive fieldwork or interviews with women politicians, which could provide additional insights. And international comparisons, while useful, face inherent limits because political systems and cultures differ so much.

Despite these limitations, combining multiple research methods and diverse sources should provide a comprehensive understanding of where we are, how we got here, and what needs to happen next to make gender-inclusive democracy real in India.

8. CHAPTER SCHEME

Chapter 1: Introduction – Setting the Stage

This opening chapter lays out why this research matters. It introduces the concept of gender-inclusive democracy, provides context about women's underrepresentation in Indian politics, outlines what questions we're asking and why, and maps out the dissertation's structure. Think of it as establishing both the problem and the roadmap for addressing it.

Chapter 2: The Constitutional and Legal Landscape

This chapter examines what the law says and what it means. It analyzes the constitutional provisions that promise equality, traces how these have been interpreted by courts over time, looks at the significance of the 73rd and 74th Amendments, and identifies both the strengths and gaps in our legal framework for women's political participation.

Chapter 3: Why Women Stay Out of Politics – The Real Barriers

This chapter gets into the nitty-gritty of what actually keeps women out of political power. It examines social and cultural barriers rooted in patriarchy, economic obstacles like campaign finance, political party resistance, violence and harassment against women in politics, how caste and class intersect with gender to create compounded disadvantages, and institutional barriers that make political life particularly difficult for women.

Chapter 4: The Women's Reservation Bill – Promise and Challenges

This chapter provides detailed analysis of the 128th Constitutional Amendment. It covers the bill's 27-year legislative history, what exactly the Amendment does and doesn't do, how the rotation mechanism is supposed to work, the sub-quota for SC/ST women, when and how implementation will happen, potential constitutional and practical challenges, and whether the Amendment delivers meaningful change or risks becoming tokenistic.

Chapter 5: Learning from the Grassroots – The Panchayat Experience

Three decades of local government reservation provides crucial lessons. This chapter examines what happened in different states, how women's participation actually played out, what impact it had on policies and governance, challenges like proxy representation and limited autonomy, what capacity building efforts worked, and what all this tells us about implementing reservation at higher levels.

Chapter 6: Conclusion – Where Do We Go From Here?

The concluding chapter pulls everything together. It synthesizes the key findings, addresses whether our hypotheses held up, and provides concrete, practical recommendations. These cover how to effectively implement the 128th Amendment, what complementary reforms are needed, how electoral processes should be made more gender-responsive, what capacity building and institutional support systems are necessary, and what political parties, civil society, and government need to do to make gender-inclusive democracy more than just a slogan.

9. STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

By completing this research, students will develop the following competencies:

1. Gain comprehensive understanding of India's constitutional and legal framework for women's political participation. Students will be able to explain how this framework evolved, identify its strengths and weaknesses, and critically analyze whether legal guarantees translate into real-world equality.
2. Develop analytical skills to examine complex, intersecting barriers to women's political participation. Students will learn to see beyond surface explanations and understand how social norms, economic constraints, political structures, and violence work together to keep women marginalized.
3. Critically evaluate the Women's Reservation Bill—moving beyond celebratory rhetoric to assess its actual provisions, implementation challenges, potential pitfalls, and what needs to happen to ensure it delivers substantive rather than just symbolic change.
4. Apply comparative analytical methods to learn from international experiences while recognizing what's transferable to

India's context and what isn't. Students will develop the judgment to distinguish between universal lessons and context-specific approaches.

5. Synthesize different types of knowledge—legal analysis, empirical data, policy evaluation, and lived experiences—to develop evidence-based, practical recommendations. Students will learn not just to analyse problems but to propose realistic solutions that account for India's political and social complexity.

