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Research Article

Women in Governance and Decision-Making: The Engine of India's Developmental State

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Abstract

Women's participation in governance is no longer a peripheral concern but lies at the heart of India's developmental transformation. As India positions itself as an emerging global power, the recognition of *Stree Shakti* as *Rashtra Shakti* has gained increasing national significance. This research article critically examines the role of women in governance and decision-making across multiple levels- local, state, and national- while situating it within India's socio-political context. Through historical analysis, theoretical frameworks, and contemporary case studies, the paper explores how women's leadership strengthens state capacity, deepens democracy, and accelerates human-centred development. The article also reviews constitutional reforms, especially the 73rd and 74th Amendments and the Women's Reservation Act of 2023, analysing their transformative impact on governance structures. With attention to persistent challenges, patriarchy, political tokenism, economic dependency, and institutional biases, the paper proposes pathways to enhance women's visibility, autonomy, and authority in public decision-making. The study concludes that women's leadership is not a symbolic representation but a structural requirement to build a socially just, inclusive, and development-driven India.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Governance in contemporary India has undergone significant changes, reflecting shifts in social structures, political consciousness, and development priorities. One of the most profound transformations has been the increasing participation of women in governance and decision-making. Historically, Indian political institutions were shaped by patriarchal values that restricted women's public roles, but the gradual expansion of constitutional rights, social reforms, education, and democratic participation has reshaped this trajectory. Today, women occupy important positions across democratic institutions, from Gram Panchayats and Municipal Corporations to State Assemblies, Parliament, and Constitutional bodies. Their presence and contributions signal not only gender empowerment but the strengthening of India's developmental state.

The idea that women's leadership enhances national development has gained widespread acceptance globally. Studies by organisations such as UN Women and the World Bank have consistently shown that women leaders prioritise education, healthcare, water, sanitation, and social protection, issues closely linked with human development and social well-being. In India, this connection becomes even more critical considering the country's vast socio-economic inequalities, diverse cultural landscapes, and developmental urgencies. Women leaders often bring unique perspectives shaped by experience, empathy, and community-oriented values, resulting in governance styles that are more inclusive and welfare-driven (Basu 112) [2].

This article explores how the participation of women in governance contributes to India's developmental aspirations. It argues that women's representation is not merely a matter of rights or identity but is central to effective governance, state responsiveness, and sustainable development. In doing so, it positions *Stree Shakti* as the driving force of *Rashtra Shakti*, reinforcing the idea that gender inclusion strengthens national capacity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The question of women's participation in governance has moved from the margins of political discourse to the centre of debates on democratic quality and development effectiveness. Early political institutions, both in India and elsewhere, were largely shaped by patriarchal social arrangements that confined women to the private sphere and normalised male dominance in public decision-making. Feminist political scholars have critically highlighted how these historically embedded power structures influenced policy priorities, institutional norms, and governance outcomes, often excluding issues central to social reproduction and human welfare.

Development theorists have further expanded this discussion by linking women's political participation with broader development outcomes. The capability-based understanding of development emphasises freedom, agency, and participation as

core elements of progress. Within this framework, women's entry into governance is not merely an expansion of representation but a transformation of decision-making processes that affect education, health, nutrition, and social security. Empirical evidence from global development institutions consistently shows that women leaders tend to allocate greater attention to social sectors and inclusive welfare policies.

In India, historical narratives reveal that women's engagement with governance is not a recent phenomenon. From early intellectual traditions and regional leadership roles to active involvement in the nationalist movement, women have long contributed to political life. However, the post-independence period witnessed a paradox: despite constitutional equality and universal adult franchise, women's numerical presence in legislatures remained strikingly low for several decades. Social norms, economic constraints, and male-dominated political networks continued to restrict women's access to power.

Scholarly attention intensified with the introduction of constitutional reservations for women in local self-government institutions. Research on Panchayati Raj Institutions demonstrates that women's leadership at the grassroots level has altered development priorities, strengthened service delivery, and increased attention to everyday governance concerns such as water supply, sanitation, healthcare, and education. Studies also suggest that women representatives often promote participatory decision-making and improve transparency in local administration.

At the state and national levels, existing literature highlights the influence of women leaders in shaping welfare-oriented policies and administrative reforms. Comparative international studies further indicate that higher women's representation in legislatures leads to changes in governance culture, legislative agendas, and accountability mechanisms.

At the same time, scholars acknowledge persistent challenges, including patriarchal resistance, political tokenism, financial dependency, and the phenomenon of proxy leadership. While numerical representation has increased in certain arenas, the translation of presence into authority remains uneven. This body of literature provides a strong foundation for examining women's governance roles but leaves scope for deeper analysis of their structural contribution to state capacity and development.

3. RESEARCH GAP

Although substantial research exists on women's political participation, several important gaps remain unaddressed.

First, much of the existing scholarship approaches women's representation primarily through the lens of gender equality and social justice. While this perspective is essential, it often overlooks the role of women's leadership as a functional component of the developmental state, particularly in strengthening institutional performance and governance outcomes. Second, empirical studies disproportionately focus

on grassroots institutions, especially Panchayati Raj bodies, resulting in a limited understanding of how women's leadership operates across multiple scales of governance. The connections between local, state, and national levels remain insufficiently explored.

Third, existing research tends to prioritise descriptive representation - counting the number of women in political institutions - rather than examining how women influence decision-making processes, governance styles, and policy implementation.

Fourth, although challenges such as patriarchy and proxy leadership are widely discussed, there is limited integrative analysis of how legal reforms, capacity-building initiatives, economic empowerment programmes, and digital governance mechanisms collectively shape women's political effectiveness.

Finally, the long-term implications of recent legislative developments, particularly the Women's Reservation Act of 2023, have not yet been systematically analysed in academic literature, especially in relation to India's developmental priorities. This study addresses these gaps by situating women's governance participation within the broader framework of state capacity, democratic deepening, and inclusive development.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To analyse the evolution of women's participation in governance across local, state, and national levels in India.
2. To examine the relationship between women's leadership and the functioning of India's developmental state.
3. To assess how women in decision-making positions influence governance priorities and development outcomes.
4. To identify socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers that limit women's autonomy in political leadership.
5. To evaluate the effectiveness of constitutional and policy interventions in enhancing women's substantive participation in governance.
6. To propose strategies for strengthening women's authority, visibility, and decision-making power within public institutions.

5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How has women's participation in governance evolved across different levels of India's political system?
2. In what ways does women's leadership shape governance practices and development priorities?
3. How does women's participation contribute to strengthening state capacity and democratic institutions in India?
4. What structural and socio-cultural constraints continue to restrict women's effective political leadership?
5. To what extent have constitutional reforms and policy initiatives translated representation into real decision-making power?

6. What measures can enhance women's substantive role in governance and public decision-making?

Theoretical Framework: Gender, Power, and the Developmental State

Understanding women's role in governance requires a theoretical discussion on gender, power structures, and the nature of the developmental state. Feminist political theory argues that traditional governance structures were designed within patriarchal systems that historically marginalised women from decision-making processes (Pateman 18) [8]. Governance, therefore, has been shaped by male experiences, interests, and priorities. Women's entry into political spaces challenges these structures by redefining who holds power and how public decisions are made.

Amartya Sen's capability approach provides another important lens. Sen argues that development must expand individuals' real freedoms to lead lives they value (Sen 36) [9]. When women participate in governance, their capabilities are expanded, and they, in turn, contribute to broadening freedoms for others. This has been evident in India, where women leaders have enhanced public service delivery, social inclusion, and community empowerment.

The developmental state theory further argues that strong state institutions are essential for driving economic growth and social development (Evans 69) [5].

In India's case, women's increasing participation in governance has strengthened the developmental orientation of the state by prioritising welfare, inclusive policies, and bottom-up planning. Together, these theoretical perspectives highlight that women's leadership is transformative not because women are inherently different but because their inclusion disrupts long-standing power imbalances and introduces diverse perspectives essential for equitable governance.

Historical Trajectory of Women's Leadership in India

Women's participation in public life has deep roots in Indian civilisation. Ancient texts mention women scholars like Gargi and Maitreyi, while rulers such as Rani Durgavati and administrators of princely states like the Begums of Bhopal shaped regional governance structures. The freedom struggle further expanded women's political roles as leaders like Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba Gandhi, Annie Besant, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, and Aruna Asaf Ali emerged at the forefront of anti-colonial movements (Forbes 154) [6].

Post-Independence, the Indian Constitution provided universal adult franchise from the beginning, unlike many Western nations, where women gained the vote much later. This ensured that women had political rights equal to men since 1950. The appointment of Indira Gandhi as India's first woman Prime Minister and later Pratibha Patil as the first woman President marked milestones in women's political representation.

However, despite early symbolic achievements, women's representation remained limited for decades. Until the 1990s, women comprised only about 5-7 per cent of Parliament and an

even smaller proportion in State Assemblies. Structural barriers, socio-economic constraints, and patriarchal norms restricted women's entry into politics (Kishwar 44) [7].

A major transformation came with the *73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992–93)*, mandating 33 per cent reservation for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies. These amendments democratized governance at the grassroots and triggered the entry of millions of women into political leadership roles. Today, India has over *1.4 million women elected representatives at the local level*, one of the largest numbers in the world.

In 2023, Parliament passed the *Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam*: the Women's Reservation Act, which mandates 33 per cent reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. This legislation is expected to reshape India's legislative landscape by significantly expanding women's presence at higher levels of governance.

Thus, India's historical journey reflects a gradual but persistent expansion of women's leadership, moving from symbolic presence to substantive participation across governance levels.

Women at the Grassroots: Transforming Local Governance

One of the most profound impacts of women's political participation has been visible at the grassroots level. Studies on Panchayati Raj Institutions show that women leaders have altered priorities, governance styles, and development outcomes. Women sarpanches often focus on issues affecting daily life- clean drinking water, sanitation, health facilities, education, and nutrition. Research in Rajasthan, West Bengal, and Karnataka has shown that villages led by women had higher investments in drinking water sources, better functioning Anganwadi Centres, and improved school enrolment (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 770) [3].

Women's leadership has also strengthened social inclusion. Female representatives are more likely to engage with Self-Help Groups (SHGs), women collectives, and marginalised castes, making governance more participatory. Their leadership style tends to emphasise dialogue, community meetings, and conflict resolution through consensus-building rather than confrontation.

Additionally, women leaders contribute to reducing corruption. Studies from Bihar and Madhya Pradesh show that women-led Panchayats often have higher transparency in fund allocation and monitoring mechanisms, largely because women's networks at the community level act as informal accountability structures.

Grassroots governance also plays an important role in reshaping gender norms. When women occupy visible public positions, they challenge patriarchal assumptions about women's roles. This has ripple effects on girls' education, women's mobility, and family decision-making.

Thus, local governance serves as the foundation for building gender-equitable political structures. It not only empowers

women as leaders but also brings a clear developmental orientation to grassroots planning.

Women in State and National Leadership

Women's participation at the state and national levels has also undergone notable expansion, although the numbers remain lower compared to grassroots representation. Nevertheless, the impact of prominent women leaders has been substantial.

India has witnessed influential Chief Ministers such as Jayalalithaa in Tamil Nadu, Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal, Sheila Dikshit in Delhi, Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh, and Vasundhara Raje in Rajasthan. Their tenures reveal that women leaders can shape long-term development trajectories, introduce welfare schemes, and implement institutional reforms. For instance, Sheila Dikshit's governance in Delhi between 1998 and 2013 transformed urban infrastructure and public services, while Jayalalithaa's policies expanded women's education, health, and welfare in Tamil Nadu.

At the national level, women ministers such as Nirmala Sitharaman, Smriti Irani, Sushma Swaraj, and Meira Kumar have played significant roles in finance, external affairs, parliamentary affairs, and social justice. Their leadership demonstrates that women can occupy and excel in portfolios traditionally dominated by men.

Moreover, the Women's Reservation Act of 2023 marks a turning point. Once implemented, it is expected to bring over 180–200 women Members of Parliament, fundamentally reshaping legislative priorities and governance cultures.

Evidence from countries such as Rwanda and Norway shows that higher women's representation leads to greater focus on welfare, gender justice, environmental protection, and inclusive policies (Tripp 89) [10]. Similar outcomes can be expected in India as women's political presence expands at the national level.

Governance Styles and Developmental Outcomes of Women Leaders

Women leaders often bring distinct governance approaches that emphasise inclusivity, transparency, and welfare. These traits, while not biologically inherent, are shaped by women's social experiences and their proximity to community needs.

Women tend to have a consultative leadership style that encourages dialogue and collective problem-solving. They often prioritise social sectors- healthcare, education, nutrition, and livelihoods because women are more likely to experience inadequacies in these areas. Research in India shows that women-led constituencies have better public service delivery, especially in health and education (Beaman et al. 235) [1].

Women leaders also contribute to reducing gender-based violence and improving women's safety. In Delhi, Mumbai, and Hyderabad, female commissioners and administrators have implemented gender-sensitive policing, helpline services, and safer public spaces.

Furthermore, women's presence increases public trust in institutions. Communities are more likely to participate in governance when they feel represented. This enhances accountability and strengthens local democracy.

Thus, women's leadership contributes significantly to India's developmental state by improving governance quality, broadening policy priorities, and strengthening community participation.

Structural Challenges Hindering Women's Political Leadership

Despite progress, women in governance continue to face structural challenges rooted in patriarchy, socio-economic inequality, and institutional biases. These challenges shape not only women's entry into politics but their autonomy and effectiveness once elected.

One of the major barriers is the persistence of patriarchal norms that view politics as a male domain. Women are often discouraged from public life and expected to prioritise domestic responsibilities. This limits their political mobility, networking opportunities, and ability to participate in decision-making spaces. Even when women enter politics, they often face gendered scrutiny, moral judgment, and stereotyping.

Economic dependency further restricts political agency. Since electoral politics in India requires significant financial resources, women from lower-income backgrounds struggle to compete effectively. Political parties also invest less in women candidates and often field them in constituencies where the chances of winning are low.

A widely-discussed challenge is the phenomenon of "proxy leadership," particularly at the Panchayat level. Although women hold elected positions, male relatives- husbands, fathers, or brothers- sometimes exercise actual decision-making authority. This results from deeply embedded patriarchal norms, limited political training, and low initial confidence among first-time women representatives. However, studies show that many women gradually overcome this barrier with experience, training, and community support.

Institutional barriers also impede women's leadership. Political parties remain male-dominated, with limited representation of women in party committees and leadership positions. Moreover, political violence, online harassment, and a lack of safety in public spaces deter women from joining politics.

Addressing these challenges requires not only legal reforms but also cultural change, capacity-building, and institutional restructuring to create a level playing field for women leaders.

Policy Measures Strengthening Women's Leadership in Governance

India has introduced several policy initiatives to strengthen women's role in governance. The reservation of seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions, as mandated by the 73rd and 74th Amendments, has had the most far-reaching impact. Some states, such as Kerala, Bihar, and Rajasthan, have increased the

quota from one-third to 50 per cent, ensuring thousands of women enter governance every year.

The Women's Reservation Act of 2023 is another historic step, though its implementation is contingent on delimitation. Once operational, it will significantly expand women's representation at the state and national levels.

Beyond reservations, other initiatives include political training programs for women representatives by government institutes such as NIRDPR, SIRD, and civil society organisations. These programs focus on financial literacy, legal awareness, leadership skills, and administrative procedures.

Women's Self-Help Groups under the National Rural Livelihoods Mission have played a critical role in political mobilisation. SHGs act as platforms for leadership development, collective bargaining, social audits, and community advocacy. Many women leaders at the Panchayat level emerged from SHG networks.

Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB), introduced in 2005, has institutionalised a gender lens in public expenditure. Ministries such as Rural Development, Women and Child Development, Health, and Education are required to report budget allocations benefiting women. This has enhanced transparency and encouraged gender-focused policy design.

Digital governance initiatives have also empowered women by enabling easier access to information, grievance redressal systems, and administrative platforms. Online training modules, digital attendance systems, and e-governance platforms have reduced bureaucratic barriers and increased participation.

These policy measures form a strong foundation for strengthening women's political agency. However, their effectiveness depends on sustained political support, institutional reforms, and societal acceptance.

Women's Leadership and India's Developmental State: A Deepening Connection

Women's leadership has had measurable impacts on India's developmental goals. At the core of the developmental state model are strong public institutions capable of delivering welfare, regulating markets, and addressing social inequalities. Women's participation enhances these capacities in multiple ways.

First, women's leadership broadens developmental priorities. Issues such as maternal health, child nutrition, water security, sanitation, and education—often overlooked by male-dominated governance- become central policy concerns. This aligns closely with India's human development agenda.

Second, women leaders often bring integrity and transparency into public administration. Several studies show that constituencies with women representatives have lower corruption levels, better monitoring, and more efficient delivery of public schemes (Dollar et al. 12) ^[4].

Third, women leaders strengthen social cohesion. Their emphasis on dialogue, community participation, and conflict resolution fosters trust in public institutions and enhances

societal cooperation. This is especially important in India's diverse social landscape marked by caste, class, and regional inequalities.

Fourth, women's leadership promotes gender equality and social justice. When women hold powerful positions, discriminatory norms are challenged, and younger generations—especially girls—gain role models who expand their aspirations and capabilities.

Thus, women's participation is not a symbolic representation but a structural pillar that strengthens India's developmental state and contributes to inclusive nation-building.

Women's Governance Impact

Numerous case studies from India highlight the transformative impact of women's leadership in governance.

In Kerala, Kudumbashree (poverty eradication and women empowerment program, 1998), women leaders have integrated local governance with livelihood programs, significantly improving poverty reduction outcomes. Women-led Panchayats in Wayanad and Alappuzha districts have shown outstanding performance in health indicators, waste management, and education.

In Rajasthan, women sarpanches have improved water conservation programs through initiatives such as creating check dams, promoting rainwater harvesting, and improving access to drinking water in desert regions.

In Bihar, women elected representatives have played an important role in ensuring school attendance, implementing mid-day meal schemes, and preventing early marriages. Their leadership has also strengthened SHG networks and increased women's participation in economic activities.

At the national level, leaders such as Sushma Swaraj transformed India's diplomacy by making the Ministry of External Affairs more citizen-friendly. Her prompt assistance to Indians abroad and her Open engagement on social media created new models of public-centred governance.

These examples demonstrate how women leaders across diverse regions and political contexts contribute meaningfully to improving governance and developmental outcomes.

The Path Forward: Building a Gender-Inclusive Governance Future

The future of India's governance depends on how effectively it integrates women into decision-making processes. While significant progress has been made, several steps are necessary for achieving genuine gender equality in governance.

Strengthening political training for women at all levels is essential. This includes leadership development, legal training, financial literacy, and digital competency. Equally important is reforming political parties to ensure greater representation of women in leadership positions, candidate selection committees, and decision-making bodies.

Institutional reforms such as fast-tracking the implementation of the Women's Reservation Act, enhancing safety for women in public life, regulating political financing, and enforcing

gender-responsive budgeting will help create an enabling environment.

Societal change is equally critical. Families and communities must actively support women's public roles. Media must avoid gender stereotypes and instead highlight women's contributions. Schools should introduce leadership programmes for girls to inspire political participation from a young age.

Ultimately, building a gender-inclusive governance future requires a collective effort from state institutions, civil society, political parties, and citizens. Women must be recognised not as beneficiaries of development but as architects of India's developmental destiny.

6. CONCLUSION

Women's participation in governance is at the core of India's developmental transformation. From local Panchayats to national leadership, women have demonstrated that their presence enriches governance, strengthens institutions, and enhances social welfare. Their leadership has reshaped public priorities, fostered inclusive growth, reduced corruption, and deepened democracy.

Yet, the journey toward gender-equitable governance is far from complete. Structural challenges rooted in patriarchy, economic inequality, and institutional barriers continue to restrict women's political agency. Overcoming these challenges requires sustained reforms, broad social acceptance, and a commitment to gender justice.

As India aims to emerge as a global leader, recognising women as co-architects of national development is not optional; it is essential. Women are not merely participants in India's governance story; they are its driving force. In this sense, *Stree Shakti* truly becomes *Rashtra Shakti*, and Women's leadership becomes the engine propelling India's developmental state.

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