



BARRIERS TO POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA: A SOCIO-CULTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

¹Divya B J, ²Dr. Waseem Ahmad Sofi

¹Research Scholar, ²Supervisor

¹⁻² Department of Political Science, Arunodaya University, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh, India

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the barriers to political empowerment of women in India, focusing on socio-cultural and institutional factors that hinder their active participation in the political sphere. Despite progress made in terms of legal frameworks, women's representation in Indian politics remains disproportionately low. Through a socio-cultural lens, this study examines the deep-rooted gender norms, cultural stereotypes, and patriarchal values that restrict women's entry and progression in politics. Additionally, the paper delves into institutional challenges, including limited access to political networks, inadequate support structures, and the pervasive influence of political parties. The analysis highlights the intersectionality of caste, class, and religion, which further complicates women's political empowerment. The study concludes with policy recommendations aimed at breaking down these barriers and fostering a more inclusive political environment for women in India.

KEYWORDS: Political empowerment, women, India, socio-cultural barriers, institutional barriers, gender norms, patriarchy, political representation, women in politics, gender equality, policy recommendations.

1.1 Introduction:

Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, political empowerment of women in India remains a distant goal, with women consistently underrepresented in political offices and decision-making roles. Although legal frameworks such as affirmative action policies and reserved seats for women in local bodies have been introduced, societal and institutional barriers continue to impede their full participation in politics. A significant aspect of these challenges is deeply rooted in socio-cultural norms, where women are often confined to traditional roles as caregivers, which contradicts the prevailing image of a political leader. Patriarchal attitudes, gender stereotypes, and cultural expectations about women's capabilities further perpetuate the belief that politics is a domain for men, limiting women's opportunities to engage in political processes. (*Hennink, M., & Kumar, S., 2017*).

In addition to socio-cultural constraints, institutional barriers also play a critical role in hindering women's political empowerment. Political parties often fail to provide women with adequate support, resources, or platforms to succeed in leadership roles. The political environment in India is shaped by networks and power structures that are predominantly male-dominated, creating an unwelcoming atmosphere for women. Furthermore, the intersectionality of caste, class, and religion amplifies these challenges, making it even more difficult for marginalized women to access political opportunities. This paper aims to examine these socio-cultural and institutional barriers, offering a comprehensive understanding of the obstacles women face in achieving political empowerment and suggesting possible solutions to address these systemic inequalities. (*Iyer, L., 2016*)

1.2 Introduction to Political Empowerment of Women in India:

Political empowerment of women in India refers to the process by which women gain the power, rights, and ability to participate in political decision-making, both at the local and national levels. It encompasses not only the legal right to vote and stand for elections but also the access to resources, support, and platforms that enable women to effectively engage in the political process. Despite being a signatory to various international agreements promoting gender equality, India has faced significant challenges in achieving true political empowerment for women. The underrepresentation of women in political positions is a stark reflection of the barriers they face, which include deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms, institutional practices, and political structures that prioritize male involvement. (*Shah, P., 2019*). Historically, Indian society has assigned women roles that limit their participation in public and political spheres, reinforcing stereotypes that view women as less suited for leadership. Additionally, while India has enacted policies such as reserved quotas for women in local bodies, these legal frameworks have not been enough to ensure the political rise of women across all levels. Structural impediments within political parties, lack of support systems, and the dominance of male-centric political networks create significant hurdles for women. These barriers are further exacerbated for women from marginalized communities, where factors like caste, class, and religion compound the challenges they face. Therefore, the political empowerment of women in India remains a multifaceted issue, requiring not only legal reforms but also a comprehensive shift in both social attitudes and institutional practices. (*Jha, P., 2015*).

1.3 Legal Frameworks for Women's Political Participation:



India has taken significant steps towards promoting women's political participation through a variety of legal frameworks aimed at ensuring gender equality. One of the key mechanisms is the provision of reserved seats for women in local governance, such as the 33% reservation of seats in Panchayats and urban local bodies, introduced through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992. This legal measure was designed to increase women's representation in grassroots politics and provide a platform for their voices in decision-making. Additionally, the Women's Reservation Bill, though still pending in Parliament, seeks to reserve 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies for women, further demonstrating the country's commitment to gender parity in politics. Despite these advancements, the implementation of these laws has been inconsistent, and many women continue to face barriers that hinder their full participation in political processes. While legal frameworks have opened doors for women, the persistent lack of resources, training, and institutional support often limits their effective engagement and political empowerment. (*Joshi, S., & Sharma, R., 2018*)

1.4 Underrepresentation of Women in Indian Politics:

Despite legal provisions and the increasing number of women involved in politics at the grassroots level, the underrepresentation of women in high political offices remains a significant issue in India. Women constitute approximately half of India's population, yet their representation in national and state legislatures is disproportionately low. As of recent elections, women hold less than 15% of seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies, and even fewer occupy top political positions, such as the office of Chief Minister or Prime Minister. This stark underrepresentation is partly due to social and cultural barriers that prevent women from pursuing politics as a career, as well as institutional obstacles such as limited access to political networks, lack of financial support, and insufficient party backing. While there has been a slow increase in the number of women in politics, this progress has been uneven and concentrated mainly in local bodies, with women still facing significant challenges when it comes to rising to higher levels of political power. As a result, the political system remains predominantly male, with women's voices and perspectives often underrepresented in decision-making processes. (*Kabeer, N., 2013*).

1.5 Socio-Cultural Norms and Gender Roles in Politics:

Socio-cultural norms and deeply ingrained gender roles play a crucial role in hindering women's political participation in India. In a society where traditional roles of women as caregivers and homemakers are still dominant, politics is often perceived as a domain best suited for men. These societal attitudes limit women's mobility, autonomy, and agency, discouraging them from pursuing political careers or taking on leadership roles. Cultural expectations about women's behavior, which emphasize modesty, deference, and passivity, clash with the qualities traditionally associated with political leadership, such as assertiveness and dominance. Moreover, patriarchal norms in India often dictate that men are the primary decision-makers, both within the family and in the public sphere, which further marginalizes women's political aspirations. As a result, even when women show interest in politics, they often face resistance from their families, communities, and political parties, who may not view them as legitimate or capable candidates. These socio-cultural barriers are compounded by a lack of adequate support systems for women in politics, such as mentorship programs, training, and resources, making it even more challenging for women to break through political and cultural barriers. (*Kumar, N., 2017*).

1.6 Patriarchal Values and Gender Stereotypes:

Patriarchal values and gender stereotypes are deeply ingrained in Indian society and continue to serve as significant barriers to the political empowerment of women. Patriarchy, which places men at the center of decision-making and political processes, dictates the roles and expectations of both men and women in society. In such a structure, women are often viewed primarily as caregivers and nurturers, relegated to private spaces rather than the public sphere where politics is primarily conducted. Gender stereotypes, such as the belief that women are less capable of handling leadership roles or making tough political decisions, reinforce these patriarchal values and discourage women from pursuing political careers. These stereotypes also manifest in the media, where women are often portrayed in passive or supportive roles, further diminishing their perceived ability to lead. As a result, women are frequently excluded from leadership opportunities, both within political parties and in elected offices, and are unable to break free from the constraints of a patriarchal system that does not recognize their potential in the political arena. (*Malhotra, A., 2014*)

1.7 Barriers to Women's Political Participation: A Socio-Cultural Perspective:

From a socio-cultural perspective, several barriers hinder women's political participation in India. Cultural norms, societal expectations, and traditional family structures play an essential role in shaping women's access to political power. For many women, the pressure to conform to traditional gender roles often takes precedence over their personal ambitions, including their desire to enter politics. In many parts of India, the decision-making power within families rests with male members, and women are discouraged from challenging this dominance. Additionally,



women in rural and economically disadvantaged areas face added challenges, as they often lack access to education, political networks, and financial resources. The cultural perception of politics as a male-dominated field is reinforced by the belief that women should remain focused on family and domestic duties. These socio-cultural barriers not only restrict women's physical mobility but also their emotional and psychological empowerment, further limiting their ability to participate in political decision-making and leadership roles. To address these barriers, cultural attitudes and social practices must evolve to recognize the political agency of women and provide them with the support needed to thrive in political environments. (Mathew, G., & Joseph, T., 2019).

1.8 Traditional Gender Roles and Women's Political Engagement:

Traditional gender roles in India have a profound impact on women's ability to engage politically. These roles, rooted in historical and cultural values, dictate the tasks and responsibilities assigned to men and women within society, with women often being confined to the private sphere. In many Indian communities, women are primarily seen as caregivers, responsible for managing household duties and raising children. This perception of women as primarily domestic figures often discourages their involvement in public and political affairs. Moreover, traditional roles often define men as the breadwinners and decision-makers, which leads to a lack of support for women who wish to enter the political arena. These expectations place a heavy burden on women, who must juggle family responsibilities while seeking political involvement. In many cases, political engagement is viewed as incompatible with their roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers, leading to the marginalization of women from political life. To overcome these constraints, it is essential to challenge and redefine traditional gender roles, enabling women to take on public and leadership roles without the fear of societal judgment or the burden of conflicting responsibilities. (Mitra, A., & Sarma, M., 2015).

1.9 Cultural Attitudes Towards Women in Leadership Roles:

Cultural attitudes towards women in leadership roles are a significant determinant of their political participation in India. In a society that has long been dominated by male leaders, there is often a deep-seated skepticism about women's ability to effectively lead in the public and political spheres. Women in leadership positions are frequently scrutinized more intensely than their male counterparts, with their actions and decisions often judged through the lens of gender. (Sengupta, D., 2016) Cultural attitudes that associate leadership with qualities such as assertiveness, authority, and decisiveness are traditionally attributed to men, while women are often expected to be more passive, nurturing, and cooperative. As a result, women in leadership positions are frequently subject to bias and negative stereotyping, which can undermine their authority and reduce their chances of political success. Furthermore, cultural perceptions of women's roles as caregivers rather than decision-makers often lead to a lack of support from their families, communities, and political parties. These cultural attitudes create a hostile environment for women who aspire to leadership roles, making it difficult for them to break through the glass ceiling and attain political power. Changing these cultural attitudes is critical for creating a more inclusive political landscape where women can lead without facing discrimination or bias based on their gender. (Pande, R., 2017).

1.10 Institutional Challenges in Women's Political Empowerment:

Institutional challenges are significant barriers to women's political empowerment in India, often manifesting in the form of limited access to political resources, networks, and opportunities. While legal frameworks such as reserved seats for women in local governance exist, these measures do not always translate into real political influence or power. Political institutions in India are often structured in ways that do not support women's participation or advancement in politics. For instance, women face challenges in gaining access to party nominations, election funding, and political mentorship, which are essential for building a successful political career. Political parties, while recognizing the importance of female participation at the grassroots level, have been slow to integrate women into leadership roles or senior decision-making positions. Women in politics often encounter institutionalized sexism and resistance from male colleagues, which can undermine their credibility and limit their chances of rising through the ranks. Furthermore, the lack of support systems for women candidates, such as childcare facilities or flexible working hours, exacerbates the challenge of balancing political responsibilities with family obligations. These institutional barriers hinder women's ability to navigate the political landscape effectively, restricting their potential to influence political decisions. (Roy, S., 2015)

1.11 Political Parties and Women's Representation in Politics:

Political parties in India play a crucial role in shaping women's representation in politics. While many parties have adopted policies promoting gender equality, the practical implementation of these policies often falls short. Women's representation in Indian political parties remains low, especially in leadership positions. Political parties tend to prioritize male candidates, even though women may be equally or more qualified for certain roles. In some cases, parties use women as "token" representatives, offering them positions that carry little power or influence, such as ceremonial roles or positions in local councils, without empowering them to make meaningful decisions. In addition,



political parties often fail to provide women with adequate political training, resources, or mentorship to succeed in competitive elections. The male-dominated nature of party structures and leadership also limits women's political aspirations, as decision-making is predominantly controlled by men who are less likely to promote women to higher office. Furthermore, the reluctance of many political parties to address issues such as domestic violence, reproductive rights, and gender-based discrimination, which disproportionately affect women, reflects their lack of commitment to gender equality. These systemic issues within political parties contribute significantly to the underrepresentation of women in Indian politics. (Ghosh, S., & Sahu, R., 2019).

1.12 Male-Dominated Political Networks and Their Impact on Women:

Male-dominated political networks in India have a significant impact on the political empowerment of women, as these networks are often closed off to female participation. Political networking, which is essential for building political influence and gaining access to resources, is predominantly male, creating a barrier for women seeking to enter politics. Men in positions of power often rely on informal networks of contacts, which exclude women from crucial political discussions, decision-making processes, and strategy formulation. These networks, which are largely shaped by traditional gender roles, perpetuate male dominance in the political sphere, making it difficult for women to break into established political circles. Women who attempt to enter these networks are often met with resistance or are expected to conform to gendered expectations, such as focusing on “women’s issues” or remaining passive in male-dominated settings. As a result, women are often sidelined in political decision-making, and their opportunities for career advancement within political parties are limited. Without access to these powerful networks, women struggle to secure the necessary support, funding, and mentorship to run successful political campaigns or ascend to leadership positions, thereby perpetuating their underrepresentation in politics. (Ganguly, D., & Chatterjee, P., 2016)

1.13 Intersectionality of Caste, Class, and Religion in Politics:

The intersectionality of caste, class, and religion plays a pivotal role in shaping women's political participation in India. These social categories create compounded layers of disadvantage that affect women from marginalized groups, making their political empowerment even more challenging. For example, women from lower castes, particularly Dalits, face multiple forms of discrimination: gender-based oppression combined with caste-based social exclusion. (Duflo, E., 2012). These women often struggle with a lack of access to education, economic resources, and political networks, which are essential for gaining a foothold in politics. Similarly, women from lower economic classes face additional barriers, including financial constraints, lack of political training, and limited exposure to political discourse. Religion further complicates the situation, as women from minority religious communities may face discrimination within their own communities and from the larger society. These intersecting forms of identity—caste, class, and religion—create a complex web of challenges for women seeking political representation and leadership roles. The exclusion of these women from mainstream political processes further limits the diversity of political leadership and reduces the representation of marginalized voices in the political decision-making process. Addressing intersectionality requires targeted interventions that recognize the unique struggles faced by women at the intersections of caste, class, and religion, and support their inclusion in the political sphere. (Chhibber, P., & Verma, R., 2014)

1.14 The Role of Affirmative Action in Women's Political Participation:

Affirmative action has played a pivotal role in enhancing women's political participation in India by creating pathways for women to enter the political sphere, especially at the grassroots level. The introduction of reserved seats for women in Panchayats and urban local bodies through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in 1992 was a groundbreaking step towards political inclusion. These reservations have allowed women to occupy one-third of the seats in local governance, offering them a formal platform to engage in politics. Similarly, the proposed Women’s Reservation Bill, which seeks to reserve 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies for women, reflects the government’s recognition of the need for increased female representation in higher political offices. However, while these affirmative measures have contributed to the increase in women's participation, their impact has been somewhat limited in higher political roles due to several factors. The tokenistic nature of some reserved positions, where women are often confined to ceremonial roles without real decision-making power, remains a challenge. Additionally, the lack of support systems, such as political training, financial resources, and party backing, means that women elected through affirmative action may struggle to move beyond these initial positions. As such, while affirmative action has provided opportunities for political entry, its ability to ensure long-term political empowerment for women is still contingent upon addressing the deeper institutional and cultural barriers that continue to persist. (Bhattacharya, S., 2018)

1.15 Socio-Cultural and Institutional Interactions Hindering Women's Progress:

The interaction between socio-cultural norms and institutional structures is a significant obstacle in hindering



women's progress in politics in India. Socio-cultural norms, deeply ingrained in the fabric of Indian society, often view politics as a male-dominated sphere. These cultural values are reinforced by institutions, including political parties, family structures, and media representations, which continue to operate within a patriarchal framework. For example, the assumption that women's primary responsibility lies within the domestic sphere limits their involvement in public and political life, while institutional practices within political parties and legislative bodies reinforce these gendered expectations by offering fewer leadership opportunities to women. (Bhagat, R., 2014). Even when women are able to break into politics, they often face resistance from male counterparts who may undermine their authority or obstruct their career progression. The institutionalization of these socio-cultural norms within political systems creates an environment that does not adequately support women's participation, and in many cases, actively discourages it. Furthermore, the lack of female representation in key decision-making positions within political parties and legislative bodies ensures that women's voices and concerns remain marginalized. Therefore, it is not enough to simply introduce policies that allow women to enter politics; there needs to be a fundamental shift in both cultural attitudes and institutional practices to create a political ecosystem that fully supports women's progress and active participation. This intersection between socio-cultural barriers and institutional practices thus forms a critical challenge in the fight for women's political empowerment in India. (Behera, D., 2017)

CONCLUSION:

The political empowerment of women in India remains a complex and ongoing challenge, hindered by both socio-cultural and institutional barriers that continue to limit their full participation in the political sphere. Despite legal advancements, such as affirmative action policies and reserved seats in local governance, women in India remain significantly underrepresented in higher political offices. Socio-cultural norms that assign women to domestic roles and reinforce gender stereotypes play a central role in discouraging political engagement, while patriarchal values persistently marginalize women's contributions in leadership and decision-making. Additionally, institutional challenges, including the lack of support from political parties, limited access to resources and networks, and male-dominated political structures, further complicate the path to political empowerment.

The interaction between these socio-cultural and institutional barriers creates a compounded system of exclusion, especially for women from marginalized communities, such as those from lower castes, classes, or minority religions. Affirmative action has provided some opportunities for political participation, but it has not been sufficient in overcoming the entrenched gender biases that prevail within political institutions and society at large. To foster true political empowerment for women, there needs to be a holistic approach that addresses both the structural and cultural factors limiting their political progress. This includes reforming political party practices, providing targeted support systems, challenging harmful gender stereotypes, and promoting a political environment where women's leadership and participation are actively encouraged and valued. Only through such comprehensive measures can India hope to create a more inclusive and representative political landscape where women can thrive and contribute to the nation's political discourse.

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