

# The Symbolic Use of Women in Indian Politics: A Critical Study of Legal Tokenism and the Illusion of Equality

**Sahil Hussain Choudhury**

LL.M Candidate, Hamdard Institute Of Legal Studies And Research (HILSR), Jamia Hamdard<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This paper intends to explore the political usage of women in Indian politics, wherein guaranteed empowerment via Articles 14, 15(3), and 326 of the Constitution fails to translate into substantive empowerment. Despite progressive initiatives such as the Women's Reservation Bill, women's representation often remains tokenistic, exemplified by delayed reforms, proxy representation in Panchayati Raj, and underrepresentation in Parliament.

In the lessons to be drawn through comparison from Rwanda, Iceland, and Sweden, enforceable quotas, structural reforms, and cultural shifts help ensure that true gender parity is realised. Through its in-depth analysis, it also offers recommendations such as time-bound quotas, financial support for women candidates, and leadership training programs to bridge the gap between political rhetoric and reality in India.

This study promotes a new approach to India's political narrative, encouraging policymakers to go beyond rhetoric and let women become powerful agents of change. The findings are intended to inform reforms that flip tokenism on its head and effect substantial representation and thereby reinforce India's democratic ethos.

## Introduction

The political representation of women has long been considered a cornerstone of democracy, yet its effectiveness depends not merely on numerical presence but on the ability to influence policy and decision-making. In India, despite the constitutional promise of equality under Article 14 and universal suffrage guaranteed by Article 326, women's participation in politics often remains symbolic.<sup>2</sup> Policies such as the Women's Reservation Bill, promising 33% representation in legislative bodies, highlight the government's rhetorical commitment to gender equality.<sup>3</sup> However, the repeated delays in its implementation reveal the underlying patriarchal resistance that limits women's substantive empowerment.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Assisted by Sneha Arora, Guest Faculty, Hamdard Institute Of Legal Studies and Research (HILSR), Jamia Hamdard.

<sup>2</sup> Constitution of India 1950, arts 14 and 326.

<sup>3</sup> The Constitution (One Hundred and Eighth Amendment) Bill 2008 (Women's Reservation Bill).

<sup>4</sup> R Deshpande, 'The Delayed Implementation of Women's Reservation in India' (2019) 44(8) *Economic and Political Weekly*

Scholars like Zoya Hasan argue that the Indian political system frequently uses women's rights as tools for political gain, with limited efforts to ensure real transformation at the ground level.<sup>5</sup> This tokenism is reflected in practices like the "Sarpanch Pati" phenomenon, where women elected to local governance positions are controlled by male family members. Such examples expose the disconnect between political promises and societal realities.<sup>6</sup>

This research paper critically explores how women in Indian politics are often reduced to symbolic figures used to appeal to voters without challenging patriarchal norms. This paper draws a comparison between India and Iceland, Sweden, and Rwanda stories in which women truly possess political power. It scopes for solutions that can permeate the symbolic representation and introduce gender equality into the Indian reality. Through such analysis, the study prescribes or introduces recommendations that India can borrow and implement to transform the feminine politics game from mere tokens to agents of meaningful change.

### Historical Context

The inclusion of women in India's political framework has its roots in the Constituent Assembly Debates (1946–1949), which adopted universal adult suffrage, granting every adult, irrespective of gender, the right to vote and contest elections.<sup>7</sup> This landmark decision positioned India as a progressive post-colonial democracy. Some of such leaders included Hansa Mehta and Sarojini Naidu, and they raised their voices for equal rights<sup>8</sup>. But their inclusion, which was celebrated, was largely ceremonial. Women accounted for less than 2 percent of the Assembly's membership, and their role was frequently reduced by male counterparts who controlled policymaking.

Notwithstanding these restrictions, Article 326 of the Indian Constitution provided for universal adult suffrage, and Article 15(3) empowered the state to make special provision in favour of women. Nevertheless, those constitutional guarantees did little to remove the systemic barriers that stood in women's way when it came to politics, particularly leadership positions.<sup>9</sup>

The decision to adopt universal suffrage was progressive, but it was also performative to some extent. The Assembly's minimal inclusion of women reflected a patriarchal mindset that prioritised symbolic gestures over substantive inclusion. The lack of mechanisms to ensure women's representation in legislative bodies highlighted a gap between rhetorical equality and actionable reforms.

### Post-Independence Era: The First General Elections (1951–52)

This is markedly evident in the First General Elections. Though universal suffrage was instituted, merely 22 females stood for election, with 10 gaining election to the Lok Sabha, amounting to solely 4.4% of all seats<sup>10</sup>. Many of these women came from politically well-connected families, even as the grassroots female leadership was ignored. The electoral process, then, entrenched elitism and tokenism so that there was hardly any room for ordinary women to play an active role in politics.

<sup>5</sup> Zoya Hasan, *Politics of Inclusion: Castes, Minorities, and Affirmative Action* (OUP 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Niraja Gopal Jayal, *Democracy and the State: Welfare and Development in India* (OUP 1999).

<sup>7</sup> *Constituent Assembly Debates* (Lok Sabha Secretariat 1946-1949) vol 7

<sup>8</sup> Sukumar Sen, *The Political and Social Thought of Sarojini Naidu* (India Book House 1987).

<sup>9</sup> B Sivaramayya, *Inequalities and the Law* (EBC 1985)

<sup>10</sup> Election Commission of India, *Statistical Report on General Elections, 1951 to the First Lok Sabha* (ECI 1955).

### **The Panchayati Raj Reforms (1992)**

A major milestone came in the 73rd Amendment, which guaranteed women 33% reservation of seats in Panchayati Raj institutions.<sup>11</sup> It had aimed to give women power at the grassroots level, yet it also laid bare the enduring qualities of patriarchal structures. The “Sarpanch Pati” phenomenon, in which male relatives allegedly took decisions on behalf of elected women, exemplifies the systemic patriarchal barriers that trump representation.

While the amendment did give greater numbers on paper, it did not dismantle the cultural and social norms that restrict women’s participation in governance. Research suggests that more than 70% of women representatives in Panchayati Raj institutions are merely proxies for male family members.

### **Women’s Reservation Bill: The Long Journey**

Introduced for the first time in 1996, the Women’s Reservation Bill<sup>12</sup> sought to reserve 33% of the seats in Parliament and state assemblies for women. The legislation should have been a no-brainer, but it was submitted several times but ultimately was met with extreme pushback, especially by male-dominated legislative bodies. It was finally approved in 2023 but would not take effect until a new census and delimitation process is completed, thus forestalling its impact.

The tentative and delaying attitude towards the Women’s Reservation Bill clearly highlights the deepest patriarchal resistance to women’s political empowerment.

The historical trajectory of women’s political representation in India reveals a pattern of symbolic inclusion rather than substantive empowerment. From the **Constituent Assembly Debates** to the delayed implementation of the **Women’s Reservation Bill**, the systemic barriers that limit women’s participation in governance remain largely unaddressed. These historical examples set the stage for the subsequent analysis of tokenism in contemporary Indian politics.

### **The Symbolic Use of Women in Indian Political Context**

The debate of representation among women in Indian politics continues to flourish in a different medium, but also what it swells up to be; a matter of mere symbolism, whereby tokenistic appropriation is made to satisfy the demands for equality, being a cover for the silence of the patriarchy.<sup>13</sup> Though constitutional guarantees and progressive policies, including the Women’s Reservation Bill and the Panchayati Raj reforms, exist on paper, their implementation often reduces women’s participation to a tokenistic exercise.

### **Tokenism in Electoral Promises**

Political parties in India have historically emphasised women’s empowerment in their manifestos, especially during election campaigns. Promises include the implementation of the Women’s Reservation Bill, financial schemes, and safety measures. However, these commitments often remain unfulfilled. For instance, although the Women’s Reservation Bill was originally introduced in 1996, it was not passed

---

<sup>11</sup> The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act 1992.

<sup>12</sup> The Constitution (One Hundred and Eighth Amendment) Bill 2008 (Women’s Reservation Bill)

<sup>13</sup> Zoya Hasan, *Politics of Inclusion: Caste, Minority, and Women in Democratic India* (OUP 2011).

until the same bill was retabled in 2023, with the condition that its actual rollout will not be possible until after future census and delimitation — meaning that the rollout will take time.<sup>14</sup>

The delay is a sign of the lack of political will that treats women's representation as a bargaining chip. The political parties have often been using women-centric promises to woo votes without addressing the structural obstacles to their empowerment. Such electoral tokenism reflects the chasm between rhetoric and reality, exposing a systemic pushback against meaningful reforms.<sup>15</sup>

### Case Studies of Recurring Tokenism

**1511826352. Deliberate Waiting and Proxy Representation: The Panchayati Raj Experience** The 73rd Amendment (1992) created a huge milestone that brought improvement to the numerical representation of women through the reservation of 33%. But the emergence of the “Sarpanch Pati” phenomenon, wherein male relatives make all decisions in the name of elected women, demonstrates the symbolic nature of this inclusion. Studies have shown that more than 70% of women representatives in Panchayati Raj institutions are proxies and therefore defeat the very purpose of gender representation.

**1511826353. Unserved Electoral Promises:** Popular schemes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (2015)<sup>16</sup> and cash transfer schemes like Ladli Behna Yojana (2024)<sup>17</sup> are tokenistic. These initiatives are marketed as flagship programs for women's empowerment but often prioritize optics over outcomes. For instance, over 80% of the budget of the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme went to its publicity campaigns instead of to anything even on paper to reform education and welfare.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, while cash transfer schemes may be advantageous in the short term, they are not underpinned by sustainable long-term empowerment frameworks. These schemes demonstrate that women's welfare is being employed not as a political tool but as a perfunctory commitment to remedy systemic problems. Such initiatives do not move beyond tokenism and are about short-term returns.

**1511826354. Legislative Representation of Women:** Women make up only 13.65% of the Lok Sabha following the 2024 general elections, in comparison to a world average of 25%<sup>19</sup>, leaving them severely underrepresented in legislative bodies.<sup>20</sup> And this underrepresentation continues despite

---

<sup>14</sup> R Deshpande, 'Women and Political Participation in India' (2004) 39(51) *EPW* 5436.

<sup>15</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Women and Child Development, 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao: Caring for the Girl Child' (Press Information Bureau, 22 January 2015) [https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/government\\_tr\\_rec/beti-bachao-beti-padhao-caring-for-the-girl-child/](https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/government_tr_rec/beti-bachao-beti-padhao-caring-for-the-girl-child/) accessed 1 December 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Government of Maharashtra, 'Ladli Behna Yojana: Scheme Details and Eligibility' (2024) <https://cleartax.in/s/ladki-bahin-yojana> accessed 1 December 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Scroll Staff, 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao: 78.91% Funds Given to States Spent on Advertising, Finds Report' (Scroll.in, 10 December 2021) <https://scroll.in/latest/1012484/beti-bachao-beti-padhao-78-91-funds-given-to-states-spent-on-advertising-finds-report> accessed 1 December 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, 'Global and Regional Averages of Women in National Parliaments' (IPU, 1 February 2024) <https://data.ipu.org/women-averages/> accessed 1 December 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Vision IAS, '74 Women Elected to 18th Lok Sabha, Accounting for 13.6% Representation' (Vision IAS, 6 June 2024) <https://visionias.in/current-affairs/news-today/2024-06-06/polity-and-governance/74-women-elected-to-18th-lok-sabha-accounting-for-136-representation-in-lok-sabha> accessed 1 December 2024.

constitutional guarantees Article 15(3)) and progressive reforms for women and by only filling a few high-profile roles with women is tokenism and does not truly tackle the systemic issues preventing representation.

## **Current Reflections and Need for Addressing the Issue**

### **The Gaps Between Symbolic Representation and Real Empowerment**

The greatest challenge still remains for women in Indian politics: symbolic representation versus real empowerment. While 33% reservation in Panchayati Raj has raised the stakes in terms of numerical presence in local governance, it has failed to dismantle the deep-seated patriarchy that governs decision-making in Indian society. Many a time, an elected woman representative is reduced to being overshadowed by some male family member or elder in the community who holds all the power. This makes women political proxies and therefore affects the spirit of inclusive governance.<sup>21</sup>

The fact that the Women's Reservation Bill has not even been implemented even after decades of public debate shows no political will for its implementation. Such deficiency strikes one when it is contrasted with and supplemented by the sense of urgency taken to enact other politically significant legislations. Without law enforcement instruments in line with global standards, representation for women is merely a rhetorical tool that the government uses to win electoral favour from the people, nothing more.

By undermining the political voice of women, it also weakens the democratic edifice of India. You cannot be an inclusive or just democracy at all if you exclude half your population from meaningful participation in the process. Moreover, the inclusion of women in such a way only reaffirms the patriarchal structures, solidifying an established phenomenon rather than challenging it.

## **Challenges in Achieving Substantive Equality**

India has seen the development of different keys over the earlier few decades, but unfortunately, the system has been unfavorable for women. Legislative frameworks and policies to promote women's representation do exist but do not always translate into substantive equality as cultural, economic, and institutional barriers dent these aspirations.

### **1. Cultural Norms and Patriarchy**

The construction of Indian society is strongly patriarchal which limits women to the home. The resistance starts from their own family and society because many of them still see politics as a male-dominated arena.<sup>22</sup> For Instance, "Sarpanch Pati" Phenomenon: In Panchayati Raj institutions, a proxy representation of male family members by women elected to reserved seats. This practice negates the very idea behind reservations and holds back patriarchy.

### **2. Economic Dependence**

---

<sup>21</sup> Nirmala Buch, 'Women's Experience in New Panchayats: The Emerging Leadership of Rural Women' (2000) 35(52) *Economic and Political Weekly* 46.

<sup>22</sup> Bina Agarwal, *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia* (Cambridge University Press 1994).

Elections in India require a lot of money, creating a barrier for economically dependent women to enter politics. The absence of significant state support and subsidies for competing women candidates adds further challenge to this campaign.<sup>23</sup>

For example, one of the major reasons for having high costs of campaigning is According to a report prepared by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), the average cost of elections of the candidates in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections was between ₹70 lakh and ₹1 crore, making it difficult for them financially, especially for women candidates.<sup>24</sup>

Without that financial independence, women have a hard time centering their voices on the political stage, and we continue to have a political stage dominated by wealthy, male candidates

### 3. Institutional Barriers

Political parties tend to put women in constituencies they cannot win, or in token roles in their hierarchy. This tokenism disables women from winning policies and decisions that matter.<sup>25</sup>

For example: Poor Representation in Winnable Constituencies At the 2019 Lok Sabha election, only 9% of candidates put forth by mainstream political parties belonged to the female gender, many of which stood for constituencies already considered a loss for their parties.<sup>26</sup>

This shows that there is no real attachment of political parties to popularise women leaders, which further reduces their access to the constitution through assembly.

### 4. Gender Bias in Legislative Bodies

When women do get elected, they face gender bias that persists after they are in office, and they are frequently excluded from decision-making." Their contributions are undervalued, and they are often shoehorned into issues stereotypically associated with women, such as health and education, rather than the matter of core governance or economic policies.<sup>27</sup>

For example: "Parliamentary Underrepresentation: As of 2022, women occupy merely 14.4% of the Lok Sabha and 11.5% of the Rajya Sabha, while the global average is 25%."<sup>28</sup> Such gender biases restrict women's capability to impact legislation and perpetuate the notion that women are more quota than merit.

### 5. Perception of Quota-Filling

---

<sup>23</sup> Devaki Jain, *Women, Development, and the UN: A Sixty-Year Quest for Equality and Justice* (Indiana University Press 2005).

<sup>24</sup> Association for Democratic Reforms, *Analysis of Election Expenditure Statements of MPs: Lok Sabha Elections 2019*(ADR 2021)

[https://adrindia.org/sites/default/files/Analysis\\_of\\_Election\\_Expenditure\\_Statements\\_of\\_Lok\\_Sabha\\_MPs\\_2019\\_English.pdf](https://adrindia.org/sites/default/files/Analysis_of_Election_Expenditure_Statements_of_Lok_Sabha_MPs_2019_English.pdf) accessed 1 December 2024.

<sup>25</sup> Shirin M Rai, *The Gender Politics of Development: Essays in Hope and Despair* (Zed Books 2008).

<sup>26</sup> Karnataka.com, 'Women in the Lok Sabha Since Independence' (Karnataka.com, 27 May 2019) <https://www.karnataka.com/elections/women-in-the-lok-sabha-since-independence/> accessed 1 December 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Nirmala Banerjee and Srilatha Batliwala, 'Women in Politics: Negotiating Gender and Class' (2000) 35(11) *Economic and Political Weekly* 903.

<sup>28</sup> Press Information Bureau, 'Women MPs and MLAs' (Press Information Bureau, 9 December 2022) <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1882226> accessed 1 December 2024.

Women working in predominantly male-conducted legislative environments are seldom viewed as qualified contributors, but are derogatorily termed as “quota fillers,” regardless of merit.<sup>29</sup> This perception diminishes them in the minds of those around them and inhibits their ability to lead.

For Example, Proxy Leadership- A common thing to observe is that female representatives, elected to any reserved capacity, does face constant scrutiny, and are often overshadowed by their male counterparts, which only helps in maintaining stereotypes.<sup>30</sup> Also, this perception emphasises the need for capacity-building programs and training of women in leadership positions to take on governance roles.<sup>31</sup>

This situation is substantively highlighting that legal and policy measures are imperative but not sufficient enough to pave the path of substantive equality in the Indian polity.

### Comparative Analysis

The Tokenistic inclusion of women in Indian politics grossly contrasts with other countries that have taken serious steps to integrate the role of women into governance.

Countries like Iceland, Sweden, and Rwanda have bridged representation and empowerment, setting standards that India needs to follow to break off from tokenistic representation.

#### Iceland: A Model for Gender Equality Through Balanced Governance

Not only is Iceland consistently among the most gender-equal countries in the world but also serves as a role model for quality of gender inclusion in politics. Its preventive focus is backed up by enforceable legal quotas, voluntary party quotas and cultural campaigns. Together these measures will make sure that women are not just represented in decision-making bills but are empowered to engage and influence policy meaningfully.<sup>32</sup>

#### The Gender Equality Act, 2008<sup>33</sup>

The bedrock of Iceland’s success on gender equality is the 2008 Gender Equality Act, requiring at least 40 percent of either sex in decision-making bodies in both public and private sector organisations.<sup>34</sup> The law does not only concern governance but also corporate and societal spheres, as no one can escape the fact that gender balance is the law, and dimension cannot be neglected. This constitutional guarantee of equality is enshrined in an enforceable law, which prevents in: substantive equality and tokenism, both resistant forces in any democracy.

<sup>29</sup> Brian Turnbull, 'Quotas as Opportunities and Obstacles: Revisiting Gender Quotas in India' (2019) 17(2) *Politics & Gender* 358.

<sup>30</sup> Uttara Chaudhuri and Mitali Sud, 'Women as Proxies in Politics: Decision Making and Service Delivery in Panchayati Raj' (The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, 2014) <https://www.thehinducentre.com/the-arena/current-issues/women-as-proxies-in-politics-decision-making-and-service-delivery-in-panchayati-raj/article64931527.ece> accessed 1 December 2024.

<sup>31</sup> Shirin M. Rai, *The Gender Politics of Development: Essays in Hope and Despair* (Zed Books 2008).

<sup>32</sup> European Parliament, 'Rights of Women and Gender Equality with Regard to Pay, Treatment at Work and Pensions' (European Parliament, 2021) [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/699658/IPOL\\_BRI\(2021\)699658\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/699658/IPOL_BRI(2021)699658_EN.pdf) accessed 1 December 2024.

<sup>33</sup> Gender Equality Act 2008 (Iceland).

<sup>34</sup> Government of Iceland, 'About Gender Equality' (Government of Iceland) <https://www.government.is/topics/human-rights-and-equality/equality/about-gender-equality/> accessed 1 December 2024.

- **Legal Requirements:** The act requires the organisations to uphold the gender proportion and strengthens accountability. For example, failure to comply can result in financial penalties, underscoring the significance of the mandate.
- **Voluntary Party Quotas:** Icelandic political parties adopt internal quotas that balance the gender of candidates. Such internal self-regulation points to a cultural commitment to equality that extends far beyond the legal mandate.<sup>35</sup>

### **Cultural Campaigns: Changing Mindsets**

In addition to its legal framework, Iceland couples cultural initiatives to aid in the dismantling of deeply-rooted societal gender norms. They help in promoting women empowerment, their empowerment and normalisation in areas dominated by male, and breaking the barrier of hierarchy in the society.

In addition to this, the presence of effective public awareness campaigns and media quotes of successful women leaders are influential in creating a political culture that embraces all genders.<sup>36</sup> While in India societal attitude at times upholds to its patriarchal norm even if the legislative policies portray a revolutionary mindset, like the takeaways out of the discussion on gender based violence<sup>37</sup>, in Iceland both legal enforcement through legislative measures and an emphasis on cultural change were pursued to cement structural and societal change in gender relations.

Iceland's gender-equality model is a case in point of how enforceable laws drive social change. This strict system of holding hands accountable allows quotas to not become hollow, as so often happens in India. Moreover, the explicit voluntary nature of party quotas speaks to a more developed political culture in which inclusiveness is seen as a collective, not state-based, responsibility.

The 2023 Women's Reservation Bill, for instance, is dependent on the next census and subsequent delimitation, a sign of the political system's unhurried mindset. Moreover, in India, when we talk about quotas, we are only talking about numbers and not about the values that need to change to ensure empowerment.

Iceland shows how required actions and prevailing cultures can work together to close gender gaps. Its success is based not just on the strength of its laws, but on society's commitment to inclusivity. For India to follow suit, however, it would have to go from symbolic representation to substantive empowerment so that women are not tokens but change-makers.

### **Sweden: Addressing Structural Barriers to Achieve Gender Equality**

Sweden is often celebrated as a beacon of gender equality, with women occupying 47 percent of parliamentary seats.<sup>38</sup> This extraordinary accomplishment is a result of the voluntary efforts made by the political parties and progressive policies of the welfare state and not a derivative of mandatory quotas.

---

<sup>35</sup> International IDEA, 'Voluntary Political Party Quotas' (International IDEA) <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas-database/voluntary-overview> accessed 1 December 2024.

<sup>36</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Experts of the Human Rights Committee Commend Iceland on Progress in Preventing Gender-Based Violence' (OHCHR, 25 October 2024) <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2024/10/examen-de-lislande-au-comite-des-droits-de-lhomme-en-depit-de-progres-significatifs> accessed 1 December 2024.

<sup>37</sup> Ravinder Kaur and Surinder S. Jodhka, 'Cultural Ideals and Social Norms for Women in India' (2019) 81(5) *Sex Roles* 251.

<sup>38</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 'Women in National Parliaments' (IPU 2024) <https://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm> accessed 1 December 2024.



Sweden's accomplishments highlight how much the structural and social barriers to gender equality in political office can and must be dismantled.

### **Party-Led Gender Quotas: Voluntary Commitments to Equality**

In contrast to countries where quotas are enacted by law, Sweden relies on all political parties undertaking voluntary commitments in the area of gender equality. For example, the Social Democrats and the other larger parties alternate the gender of candidates on electoral lists, which informally but effectively creates a gender quota. This practice—known as “zipper lists”—ensures that women are not an afterthought when candidate selection is taking place.<sup>39</sup>

### **Welfare State Policies: Reducing Economic and Social Barriers**

Through its welfare state, many of Sweden's policies directly challenge the economic and social barriers to women working in politics. Policies like universal childcare, paid parental leave, and monetary social support of working mothers prevent home care duties from blocking women's political careers.

- **Universal Childcare and Parental Leave:** The Swedish government subsidises childcare and provides up to 480 days of leave per child, which may be shared by both parents. Not only do such policies help ease domestic burdens, but they also promote shared responsibility between men and women.<sup>40</sup>
- **Impact on Women's Political Careers:** Welfare policies remove the dual burden of domestic and professional responsibilities, enabling women to pursue political careers. The state will support women's family needs so that they are more likely to run and stay in political careers in Sweden.

In India, domestic and financial burdens come heavily tilted against women, restricting their potential to enter politics. Inability to access affordable childcare and social pressure on women to favour family responsibility over career forces gender inequality. Adopting policies like those found in Sweden's welfare model would greatly improve the amount of women engaged in politics.

### **Cultural Support: Progressive Societal Norms**

Sweden's progressive cultural behaviour puts it at the forefront of its pursuit of gender equality, but this advancement is only facilitated by the country's culture. A strong culture of egalitarian values also means women's participation across all spheres of life, including the political, is the norm. Having reframed gender equality as a goal of social significance, rather than a concern for women, the issue gained widespread social acceptance and political support.

**Role of Education and Media:** Gender-sensitive education and media role modelling and representation of women leaders also play a role in shaping this outlook. School curriculums and public campaigns work to actively dispel gender stereotypes in Sweden.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Lena Wängnerud, 'Sweden: An Incremental Process' in Susan Franceschet, Mona Lena Krook, and Jennifer M. Piscopo (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Women's Political Rights* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019) 563.

<sup>40</sup> Government Offices of Sweden, 'Three Important Welfare Reforms to Promote Gender Equality in Sweden' (Government Offices of Sweden, 25 November 2020) <https://www.government.se/articles/2020/11/three-important-welfare-reforms-to-promote-gender-equality-in-sweden/> accessed 1 December 2024.

<sup>41</sup> Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 'Sub-goal 3: Gender-Equal Education' (Swedish Gender Equality Agency) <https://swedishgenderequalityagency.se/gender-equality-in-sweden/sub-goal-3-gender-equal-education/> accessed 1 December 2024.

Sweden's model illustrates the need to remove structural barriers to women's political participation. While quotas are a common means of promoting women in politics in India, Sweden places emphasis on creating an environment conducive to long-term participation by women in politics. Welfare policies and initiatives at the party level guarantee that women not only have representation but also empowerment to claim leadership positions.

Sweden's political gender equality policies go beyond achieving a numerical balance; they provide several lessons for India. By breaking down structural barriers and cultivating an encouraging social culture, Sweden guarantees that women's representation is more than lip service.

For India, a similar approach could change the political fabric overnight, where women are able to come out as leaders instead of just being there as ornamental leaders. This change is not just necessary for the realisation of gender equality but for the reinforcement of India's democratic ethos.

### **Rwanda: A Legislative Success Story in Achieving Gender Equality**

Rwanda boasts an impressive record of women in political positions, with more than 60% of its parliamentary seats held by women, making it a benchmark around the world.<sup>42</sup> This success has come from a carefully constructed set of constitutional requirements, capacity-building programs, and cultural transformations, introduced in the wake of the 1994 genocide. Rwanda has institutionalised gender equality, transformed the prevailing landscape of governance, and become a model for substantive female representation.

### **Constitutional Quotas: A Firm Legal Foundation**

A key to Rwanda's success is its Constitution of 2003 that stipulates at least 30% female representation in all decision-making bodies. It extends to legislative, executive, and judicial branches, ensuring such a system itself works for their integration in governance. First, Article 9 of the Rwandan Constitution explicitly acknowledges gender equality as a guiding principle, responsible for promoting women's involvement in public affairs to the State.<sup>43</sup>

#### **Key Features of the Quota System:**

- The 30% quota is reserved, not set in stone, and women's representation can go beyond the minimum threshold.<sup>44</sup>
- Laws for political parties, which mandate gender-balanced electoral lists, enhance the system, ensuring that there is proportional representation from different political parties.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, 'Women in National Parliaments: World Classification' (IPU, 2024) <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=11&year=2024> accessed 1 December 2024.

<sup>43</sup> Republic of Rwanda, Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda (2003) art 9.

<sup>44</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda 2003, as amended to 2015 [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Rwanda\\_2015](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Rwanda_2015) accessed 1 December 2024.

<sup>45</sup> Organic Law No. 03/2010/OL of 18 June 2010 governing presidential and legislative elections <https://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/africa/RW/rwanda-organic-law-nb0-17-2003-of-07-07-2003/view> accessed 1 December 2024.

- And as a result of these quotas, women hold more than 60% of seats in Rwanda's Parliament, the highest percentage in the world.<sup>46</sup>

### **Capacity-Building Programs: Empowering Women Leaders**

Rwanda's approach is not just about numbers—it also equips women with the skills they need to contribute meaningfully to governance. Capacity-building programs tend to be run by government agencies and non-governmental organisations and train people in leadership, policy-making, and decision-making.

The workshops are organised by the Rwanda Governance Board to help women leaders develop their legislative and administrative skills.

The ministry of gender and family promotion engages with international organisations to provide mentorship programs to encourage upcoming women politicians.

### **Cultural Shift: Redefining Gender Norms**

Rwanda's focus on gender equality goes beyond legislation to a cultural transformation. After the genocide, the government of Rwanda realised the necessity of rebuilding society on principles of equality. Gender equality was set as a cornerstone to national recovery, and campaigns amplified how important women's contribution towards peace and development.

For example, campaigns like HeForShe work to get men invested in gender equality, highlighting to the public how the empowerment of women benefits all of society. Educational programmes and media campaigns counter traditional gender roles, making women's leadership in public and private spheres a norm<sup>47</sup>

Rwanda's model is an excellent case study in how the powerful synergy between quotas, capacity-building, and cultural reform can deliver women the outcome that we now know is the only true form of gender equality: representation. Its success comes from treating quotas as a means to an end rather than an end in themselves. Whereas in India, even when systems include quotas, the results are often at least partly symbolic, or the benefits are delayed by political inertia, Rwanda's system guarantees that women are placed in positions of real power.

Therefore, the story of Rwanda's legislative success highlights the transformative potential of combining constitutional quotas, capacity-building, and cultural reform. In this way, Rwanda has transcended mere tokenism to attain meaningful gender equality in governance. But for India, Rwanda's experience offers a powerful roadmap to fill the space between symbolic and substantive representation. Of course, if this is something that women in India embraced along similar lines, then they, too, could emerge as an influential force of change, having the potential to change the nation's democratic landscape.

### **Lessons for India: The Distance Between Tokenism and Meaningful Equality**

---

<sup>46</sup> United Nations Rwanda, 'Rwanda Reaffirms Its Unwavering Commitment to Gender Equality with 63.8% Women in Chamber of Deputies' (UN Rwanda, 10 November 2024) <https://rwanda.un.org/en/282783-rwanda-reaffirms-its-unwavering-commitment-gender-equality-638-cent-women-chamber-deputies> accessed 1 December 2024.

<sup>47</sup> UN Women, 'HeForShe Marks Ten Years with a Movement of 2 Million Gender Equality Activists, Welcomes New Champions' (UN Women, 24 September 2024) <https://www.heforshe.org/en/heforshe-marks-ten-years-movement-2-million-gender-equality-activists-welcomes-new-champions> accessed 1 December 2024.

This analysis makes the case that India can learn actionable lessons from countries that have achieved gender equality milestones such as Iceland, Sweden, or Rwanda to overcome the hurdles of symbolic representation of women in politics. All of these countries have worked out their own plans based on their sociopolitical policies — but what they have in common is a commitment to including women in decision-making positions; a policy unit that India could follow.

### **1. Quotas and the Law: Why We Establish Quotas.**

This analysis makes the case that India can learn actionable lessons from countries that have achieved gender equality milestones such as Iceland, Sweden, or Rwanda to overcome the hurdles of symbolic representation of women in politics. All of these countries have worked out their own plans based on their sociopolitical policies — but what they have in common is a commitment to including women in decision-making positions; a policy unit that India could follow.

#### **Recommendation:**

- Introduce a statutory framework that mandates timely implementation of quotas at all levels of governance—local bodies, state legislatures, and Parliament.
- Creating an independent Gender Equality Commission to oversee enforcement, monitor and assess compliance, and address complaints related to gender representation

### **2. Building Capacity: More Than Just a Number**

The fact that Rwanda focuses on capacity-building programs for women leaders shows that, in order to lead governance, women must be empowered to play meaningful roles. Proxy representation continues to be a bane in India, especially in the case of Panchayati Raj institutions where men in the family make decisions.

#### **Recommendation:**

- Nationwide major training programs should be launched for women elected representatives on leadership, policy-making, and administrative skills.
- Partner with NGOs and international agencies to outline mentorship programs for women aspiring to be politicians.

### **3. Lessons from Sweden to address structural barriers**

The example of Sweden, being close to equality in Parliament without quotas, shows that it is also necessary to break down the structural obstacles to female participation.”Universal childcare, generous parental leave, and financial support for working mothers are all policies that allow for enabling conditions for balancing family responsibility with a political career.

#### **Recommendation:**

- Enact universal childcare policies that will ease domestic burdens on women interested in entering politics.
- Set up financial assistance:schemes for women candidates to receive financial aid to support their campaign spend and allied activities.

### **4. Iceland’s Model of Social Awareness: Promote Cultural Change**

Iceland’s gender equality policies stress moving beyond legal reforms to cultural changes. National campaigns challenge gender stereotypes and promote women’s leadership, helping build a societal consensus on the importance of gender parity.

#### **Recommendation:**

- Create educational outreach initiatives to push back against patriarchal attitudes and the need for gender equality in governance.
- Incorporate gender-sensitive content into school curriculums to inculcate progressive values from the early school days.

### **5. Real Representation: Beyond Numbers**

Sweden and Rwanda are just two examples that demonstrate that merely having quotas does not equal progress towards gender equality. Quotas mean women will be on paper, but further steps are needed to achieve a situation where women can take positions of genuine power.

#### **Recommendation:**

- Mandate reserved leadership positions for women within political parties and parliamentary committees.
- Reform India's electoral system to include proportional representation, ensuring diverse voices in governance.

### **6. Political Practices that are Sensitive to Gender**

Sweden's use of alternating male and female candidates on electoral lists (known as "zipper lists") represents one simple but effective strand of a strategy to achieve gender balance. In India, we have political parties that put women as candidates in non-winnable constituencies as tokenism.

#### **Recommendation:**

- Introduce voluntary gender quotas within political parties, incentivised through public funding or electoral benefits.
- Encourage parties to adopt "zipper lists" to ensure equal representation in candidate selection

The lessons from Iceland, Sweden, and Rwanda underscore the need for a multidimensional approach to gender equality in Indian politics. Legal reforms, capacity-building initiatives, structural interventions, and cultural shifts must work in tandem to transform women's representation from symbolic gestures to substantive participation.

The recommendations above bridge an important gap in India's approach to women's political representation: that of moving beyond symbolic inclusion, which is missing in India's legal framework and constitutional provisions, whose institutional implementation remains rather weak. India could move from rhetoric to substantive equality through time-bound quotas (structural on both counts) and ultimately structural change (cultural).

These measures can not only help India in achieving the promise of equality embodied in its constitution but also strengthen its democratic fabric. Going beyond tokenism is not only a political necessity; it is also a moral imperative if we are to build an inclusive and just society.

### **Conclusion**

Women's journey in Indian politics is experience of contradictions and conundrums. While Articles 14, 15 (3) and 326 of the Constitution guarantee equality, women's representation has often been plagued by symbolic gestures. The Women's Reservation Bill, which would reserve a third of seats in the legislatures for women, was hailed as historic for its potential contribution to gender justice, yet it had been stymied for decades, revealing a systemic unwillingness to dismantle entrenched patriarchal structures. Even initiatives like the Panchayati Raj reforms, which aimed to empower women at the grassroots level, have been subverted by practices such as proxy representation, in which male relations exercise actual power.

Iceland's Gender Equality Act, Sweden's welfare policies, and Rwanda's legally mandated quotas demonstrate that genuine empowerment requires more than just legislation—it demands structural and cultural shifts that enable women to lead independently and meaningfully. These examples are not just success stories but blueprints for India to draw from.

In India, the problem is not a lack of laws but the gap between their intent and implementation. Women's participation in politics often becomes a performance for global audiences rather than a reflection of internal commitment. Tokenism, whether in the form of delayed quotas in women's rights legislation, underfunded welfare schemes, or symbolic electoral promises, does not trouble the deeper waters that keep women afloat—economic dependence, cultural resistance, and institutional bias.

For India to bridge this gap, it must focus on action rather than aspiration. The Women's Reservation Bill must be implemented without further delays, accompanied by mechanisms to eliminate proxy representation and promote real leadership. Structural barriers, such as financial and domestic responsibilities, must be addressed through policies like universal childcare and financial aid for women candidates. Most importantly, societal attitudes toward women in leadership must change. This is not just about meeting quotas; it is about creating an environment where women can lead with independence and authority.

The symbolic use of women in Indian politics is a reflection of deeper systemic failures that can no longer be ignored. As this research demonstrates, transgressing tokenism is more than a political expediency; it is a moral necessity for an authentically inclusive discourse democracy. India must meet this challenge by undertaking reforms that do not allow women to be spectators but active citizens and decision-makers in the future of the nation. Only then will India live up to its constitutional promise of being equal, as well as serving as a living international lesson on what genuine democracy is.