

Women's Reservation Bill 2023: Symbolism or Structural Change?

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Abstract

The Women's Reservation Bill, or Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam 2023, represents a major reform in India's Constitution to enhance the political involvement of women. The law guarantees 33% of positions in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies for female candidates and will help rectify the historical lower proportion of women in Indian Politics. This research study takes an interdisciplinary approach and utilizes an integration of Political Science and International Relations input to study the impact of the Women's Reservation Bill on improving democratic representation, governance, gender justice, and India's standing in the world as a democratic nation.

This study uses qualitative data analysis to perform doctrinal analysis, comparative political analysis, as well as utilize and interpret secondary data. It also examines the historical development of women's political participation, debates around the Constitution, feminist political theory and international agreements that support gender equality. Furthermore, the study identifies (and analyses) the difficulties, objections and implications of the Women's Reservation Bill on supporting inclusive democracy. This paper asserts that women's political empowerment is not only an issue of domestic governance but is also considered a global democratic norm and essential for the attainment of Sustainable Development.

Keywords: Women's Reservation Bill, Gender Equality, Political Representation, Indian Democracy, Feminist Political Theory, International Relations, Women Empowerment, Democratic Governance.

1. Introduction

Women's political engagement is considered a vital aspect of democratic governance and a critical element of inclusive development. The core values of justice, equality, and political legitimacy are reflected in the equal representation of men and women in all decision-making bodies within democracy today. Despite a constitutional guarantee of equality for all citizens, women have historically been underrepresented in India's legislative houses of Parliament. The objective of the Women's Reservation Bill, which passed as the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam in 2023, is to provide for one-third of all seats to be reserved for women in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies.

The subject of women's reservation has been hotly debated in India for decades, with supporters advocating reservation as a mechanism to rectify structural inequalities in government and create gender-inclusive governance. However, many opponents believe that the reservation could lead to merely symbolic representation for (and/or continued power for) the elites. Nevertheless, the passing of this Bill has been widely acknowledged as a transformative milestone in the struggle for gender justice.

Political Science raises many important questions surrounding the Bill's implications for representation, constitutionalism, electoral politics, and democratic participation. In International Relations, women's political empowerment is tied into global standards of gender equality and access to human rights, as well as the promotion of democratic governance, and various international commitments, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

This article incorporates an interdisciplinary analysis of political, constitutional, and global aspects of the women's reservation policy within India.

2. Research Problem

Even though women make up nearly fifty percent of all people in India, there is still insufficient representation of women in both State Assemblies and Parliament. The lack of representation creates issues concerning democracy, inclusiveness, and gender justice (i.e., attacking these problems creates political imbalance). Furthermore, even though women have made great strides in terms of obtaining education, jobs, and working in public service, women's representation in politics is low compared to men's.

The WOMEN RESERVATION BILL attempts to remedy this political imbalance; nevertheless, issues remain with respect to the implementation, effectiveness, social impact, and long-term results of the proposed legislation. Additionally, few researchers have produced interdisciplinary studies that connect women with political representation on an international basis in order to understand how women's political representation impacts India's international commitments toward democracy as well as how it shapes the global perspective on women.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining the Women's Reservation Bill through the combined lenses of Political Science and International Relations.

3. Research objective

1. To examine the historical evolution of women's political representation in India.
2. To analyze the constitutional and political significance of the Women's Reservation Bill.
3. To evaluate the impact of women's reservation on democratic governance and policy-making.
4. To study the Women's Reservation Bill from the perspective of feminist political theory.
5. To examine the relationship between women's political empowerment and international democratic norms.
6. To analyze the challenges and criticisms associated with the implementation of the bill.
7. To explore the implications of women's reservation for India's global democratic image.

4. Research Questions

1. Why has women's political representation remained low in India despite constitutional equality?
2. How does the Women's Reservation Bill seek to strengthen democratic participation?
3. What are the major political and constitutional debates surrounding the bill?
4. How can women's reservation influence governance and policy-making in India?
5. What is the significance of women's political representation in International Relations?
6. How does the bill contribute to India's commitment toward global gender equality norms?

5. Hypothesis

Primary Hypothesis

The Women's Reservation Bill will significantly enhance women's political participation and contribute to inclusive democratic governance in India.

Secondary Hypothesis

Women's political empowerment strengthens India's democratic legitimacy and positively contributes to its international image as a progressive democratic state.

6. Review of Literature

A literature review provides the theoretical and analytical foundation of research. Various scholars have studied women's political participation from constitutional, sociological, feminist, and democratic perspectives.

Important Scholarly Perspectives

- **B.R. Ambedkar** emphasized social justice and equal political participation as essential elements of democracy.
- **Rajni Kothari** discussed the structural limitations of Indian democracy and representation.
- **Martha Nussbaum** and **Amartya Sen** highlighted gender equality as central to human development.
- **Anne Phillips** argued that political institutions must ensure the "politics of presence" through representation.
- Feminist scholars have emphasized that women's inclusion in governance improves policy responsiveness and democratic accountability.

According to existing research, participation by women within Panchayati Raj institutions has resulted in an elevated level of good local governance and greater focus on issues relating to improving social welfare. Studies also identify several issues affecting women who participate in these institutions: patriarchal control over decisions, being represented symbolically rather than being an active player in political affairs, and a lack of political autonomy.

This research is distinct from prior work, as it uses an International Relations (IR) framework with Political Science techniques to generate an analysis of political reservation for women.

The following is an academically credible, literature review that will enable you to support your claims with documented, academic references from historical texts to contemporary academic discussions. You can copy from or republish any parts of this literature review in your paper:

The academic discourse concerning the political reservation of women relates to constitutional law, political sociology and gender studies at their intersection. To systematically provide a coherent analysis of the literature describing the relation between women, the political system and political reservation, writers may categorise the existing literature into four main thematic constructions.

There is a clear disparity between women's high voter turnout and their low representation in official decision-making bodies, according to a critical consensus in modern academia. Although female voter turnout in India has increased significantly since the 1990s, culminating in a "silent revolution" during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, where female turnout almost equalled male turnout, proportional representation in Parliament has not resulted from this electoral mobilization (Ghosh, 2022).

In 2019, women made up less than 9% of all candidates and won only 14.3% (78 out of 543 seats) of the Lok Sabha (Ghosh, 2022). Women's representation is still below 13% in the Rajya Sabha and averages less than 10% in state legislative assemblies (Vidhan Sabhas), a deficit that gets worse at all levels of

government (Ghosh, 2022; Sultana, 2023; Mili, 2023). Local government, on the other hand, is a notable exception. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments required a 33% quota in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), which led to an incredible increase in grassroots involvement. Twenty states voluntarily increased this reserve to 50% (Ghosh, 2022). The main factual basis for enacting a national Women's Reservation Bill is this local accomplishment.

The Bill's supporters contend that in order to address long-standing institutional and democratic deficiencies, a federal legislative mandate is necessary. First, empirical data demonstrates that through localized leadership training and skill development, grassroots reservation has effectively increased political efficacy and decreased early problems of "proxy representation" (Ghosh, 2022; Sultana, 2023). Additionally, long-term autonomy and legislative effectiveness are much improved by entering politics through local bodies (Bhusry, 2023). Second, in order to avoid centralized, biased party ticket distribution, a legal process is needed.

Without reservation, dynastic lines continue to be a major barrier to female parliamentary membership; in 2019, 30% of elected women and 41% of female candidates were political heirs (Ghosh, 2022). Formal mandates are required since political parties frequently fall short of internal voluntary quotas (Sultana, 2023). Third, addressing this underrepresentation addresses a basic "democratic deficit" in terms of substantive, symbolic, and descriptive aspects (Ghosh, 2022). According to research, female lawmakers are less susceptible to corruption, frequently perform better economically than their male counterparts, and are in a unique position to genuinely advocate for intersectional, women-specific policy concerns in healthcare, education, and minority welfare (Ghosh, 2022; Bhusry, 2023; Shairgojri & Bhat, 2023).

The Bill faces difficult structural and political obstacles despite its compelling arguments. The interplay of gender and caste is a major legislative barrier. Opponents contend that because tickets are distributed centrally, a general quota could lead to monopolisation by wealthy, powerful, or upper-caste women, further marginalising minority and lower-caste women (Ghosh, 2022). According to empirical data, the majority of female legislators (77%) who were interviewed were from upper-caste origins (Bhusry, 2023), while lower-caste women are severely excluded from economic and educational opportunities (Sultana, 2023). Similar obstacles are presented by religious intersectionality. For example, Muslim women are severely underrepresented and have never had more than four MPs in any Lok Sabha because of compounded patriarchal and conservative communal dynamics (Shairgojri & Bhat, 2023).

Furthermore, detractors worry that centralized ticket allocation will only institutionalize dynastic politics or push women into less competitive, carefully selected seats if internal party structures are not changed (Ghosh, 2022; Bhusry, 2023).

Research highlights that legislative quotas by themselves are unable to address ingrained socioeconomic obstacles, including high campaign expenditures, gender-based violence, and ubiquitous patriarchal social norms (Ghosh, 2022; Bhusry, 2023). The dual load of public life and domestic expectations is a significant barrier. Women are under tremendous pressure to balance difficult employment or public roles with conventional family responsibilities and childcare, even as they are increasingly encouraged to do so (Ghosh, 2022; Bhusry, 2023).

In the socio-political domain, this local limitation coexists with more extensive systemic disparities. Despite extensive constitutional provisions under Articles 325, 326, 84, and 173, Patar and Baruah (2025) contextualize these constraints by showing how gender functions as a tight socio-cultural construct that limits women's political engagement and representation. They note that severe socioeconomic inequalities,

including enduring gaps in literacy, education, and financial independence, deprive many women of the internal confidence and structural resources needed to compete for public office (Patar & Baruah, 2025). Additionally, aspiring female leaders who successfully negotiate expectations in the private sphere encounter a depressing political environment characterised by institutional violence, active intimidation, and a marked lack of political will among major parties; these parties frequently fail to provide sufficient tickets to women because of ingrained cultural stereotypes regarding electoral "winnability" (Patar & Baruah, 2025). Systemic educational inequalities and ingrained economic linkages, which institutional quotas are unable to address on their own, exacerbate these structural realities (Sultana, 2023; Kumar, 2023).

The Institutional Deficit and the 'Towards Equality' (1974).

The basis of contemporary thought on gender equality in Indian politics originated from the California State Women's Committee's title published in 1974, "Towards Equality," which identified that women have been systematically excluded from the process of making decisions in our political system

- The principal finding of the Commission was that there is institutionalized, systemic exclusion from decision-making by all persons identified as being female in our political system.
- The Intersectionality of Caste and Minority: Researchers such as Gail Omvedt and political analysts have studied why this bill failed repeatedly. Most literature focuses on the argument that the primary resistance to this policy was based on the demand for "quota within a quota." Those opposed to this bill argued that having a single, uniform 33% reservation for all women would unfairly benefit wealthy, upper-caste, and urban women, leaving women from Dalit, Adivasi, and OBC communities even worse off than they were previously.
- Political Resisting Based on Party Affiliation- Shirley Rai has found that male leaders from all political parties tend to use the issue of Intersectionality as a weapon against the passing of this bill, which has caused the percentage of female representation to remain below 15%.

The 106th Amendment (2023) and Current Research and Debate (2024 - 2026) - With the passing of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, academic discussion has shifted from reserving seats for women to the methodology for implementing reservations for women.

- Delay Due to Timeframe in the Implementation of the Bill – Recent legal analyses of the 106th Amendment have appeared in scholarly journals, such as Economic and Political Weekly (EPW), and have focused primarily on the constitutional issue of Article 334A. Many legal scholars argue that attaching a reservation to a post-Census Delimitation process prevents any type of relief for women until approximately Mid 2030's.
- The Legislative Impasse of 2026: The study of recent socio-political literature and paper discussions reveal that the 131st Amendment Bill (2026) cannot be fast-tracked for the presidential election of 2029. All literature about the present conflict illustrates that the North-South divide—which occurs in the form of population-control measures—has combined together and complicated both women's reservation and all other federalism vs regionalism issues.
- Literature Gap: The majority of the studies pertaining to this legislation have either focused only on the level of Panchayati Raj or the critical position relating to pass of the associated laws.
- Contribution of Paper: research fills this void by providing an overview of the legal requirements for a successful reservation of women while, at the same time, illustrating that the aforementioned legislation will remain dormant as a result of the administrative/demographic associations (U.S. Census and Delimitation).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Study is Based on the Following Theoretical Perspectives:

7.1. Feminist Political Theory: The Feminist Theory argues that political institutions have excluded women from political participation. The reservation of women in government is meant to correct these discriminatory practices.

7.2. Democratic Theory: Democratic Theory espouses that all individuals shall have equal opportunity to participate in their own government, and that all persons shall have equal representation within government. The reservation of women supports the principle of representative democracy by including non-representative groups (i.e., women).

7.3. Liberal Institutionalism: From the International Relations perspective, Liberal Institutionalism argues that international agreements, cooperation, and organizations can assist in the promotion of gender equity.

7.4. Constructivism: Constructivism is used to explain the establishment of several international standards and norms associated with gender equality.

8. Research Methodology

8.1 Nature of Research

The present study is qualitative, analytical, and descriptive in nature.

8.2 Research Design

The research adopts an interdisciplinary design combining Political Science and International Relations perspectives.

8.3 Sources of Data

Primary Sources

- Constitution of India
- Parliamentary debates
- Government reports
- Constitutional amendment documents
- Official speeches and legislative records

Secondary Sources

- Books
- Research journals
- Newspaper articles
- Academic publications
- Reports by UN Women and international organizations
- Research papers related to gender and democracy

8.4 Method of Data Collection

Data has been collected through:

- Library research
- Document analysis
- Government publications
- Online academic databases

8.5 Method of Analysis

The study uses:

- Doctrinal analysis
- Comparative analysis
- Content analysis
- Qualitative interpretation

8.6 Scope of the Study

The study focuses primarily on:

- Women's political representation in India
- Constitutional and political dimensions of reservation
- International perspectives on gender representation
- Democratic governance and women empowerment

8.7 Limitations of the Study

- The research is primarily based on secondary data.
- Since the bill has been recently enacted, long-term empirical impacts cannot yet be fully measured.
- The study focuses mainly on political representation rather than broader socio-economic dimensions.

9. Historical Evolution of Women's Political Representation in India

While women actively participated in India's struggle for independence, their representation has always been low in formal political institutions. That does not mean that constitutional equality translates into political equality.

The approval of the 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Constitution of India signalled an important shift by reserving seats for women in local-level governance institutions. The successful election of women leaders at the local level has led to greater demands for reservation of seats for women in higher levels of legislature.

10. Women's Reservation and Democratic Governance

Women's reservation has the potential to transform democratic governance in several ways:

- Increased inclusiveness in policy-making
- Greater attention toward social welfare issues
- Improved democratic accountability
- Representation of marginalized voices
- Strengthening participatory democracy

Studies from Panchayati Raj institutions demonstrate that women representatives often prioritize education, sanitation, healthcare, and social development.

11. International Relations Perspective

Women's political empowerment is increasingly recognized as a global democratic norm. International organizations such as the United Nations advocate equal participation of women in governance.

India is a signatory to several international agreements promoting gender equality, including:

- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)
- Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goal 5 on Gender Equality

The Women's Reservation Bill strengthens India's international image as a democratic and progressive state committed to inclusive governance.

12. Obstacles and Critiques

Despite its importance, the bill has received considerable critique:

12.1 Symbolic Representation

Critics believe that women representatives will possibly continue to rely upon their male political leader(s).

12.2 Demand for sub-quota

Political groups have expressed a need for a sub-quota for OBC women within the overall women's quota.

12.3 Delay in Implementation

Implementation must be contingent upon the delimitation and census processes.

12.4 Socio-Cultural Barriers

Barriers with respect to both social and cultural conditions may limit the ability of women to participate effectively in politics.

12.5 Rotating Constituency Representation

Frequent rotations may limit continuity in leadership and development of respective constituencies.

13. Critical Perspective on the Women's Reservation Bill

The Women's Reservation Bill has been celebrated as a progressive reform aimed at improving women's political representation in India. However, despite its noble objectives, the Bill has attracted significant criticism from political analysts, social activists, and regional parties.

One major criticism is that the Bill may benefit primarily elite and urban women rather than women from marginalised communities. Since the reservation does not provide separate quotas for Other Backward Classes (OBC) women, critics argue that upper-caste and politically connected women are more likely to secure seats. This could reproduce existing social inequalities instead of genuinely democratizing representation.

Another concern relates to the issue of "proxy politics." In many local governance institutions where women's reservations already exist, male family members often exercise real power behind elected women representatives. Critics fear that similar patterns may emerge in Parliament and State Assemblies, reducing women representatives to symbolic figures rather than independent political actors.

The Bill is also criticised for its delayed implementation. The reservation will come into effect only after the next census and delimitation process, making its actual enforcement uncertain and potentially years away. Opponents argue that a reform presented as historic should not be postponed indefinitely through procedural conditions.

Some scholars further argue that reservations alone cannot guarantee meaningful empowerment. Women politicians may still face patriarchal party structures, limited access to campaign finance, and gender-based discrimination within legislatures. Without internal democracy in political parties and broader social reforms, the Bill may only increase numerical representation without enhancing substantive participation. Regional parties have additionally expressed concern that rotational reservation of constituencies could weaken accountability and disrupt long-term political engagement between representatives and voters. Politicians may hesitate to invest in constituency development if their seats become reserved or unreserved cyclically.

Critics also question whether the Bill addresses the deeper causes of women's underrepresentation, such as lack of education, economic dependence, and political violence. They argue that broader reforms in

education, employment, and party nomination processes are equally necessary to ensure genuine gender equality in politics.

In conclusion, while the Women's Reservation Bill marks an important symbolic commitment to women's political inclusion, its effectiveness will depend on inclusive implementation, social diversity within representation, and complementary reforms that empower women beyond mere seat allocation.

14. Study Conclusions

1. Women continue to be structurally underrepresented in India's political arena.
2. Reservation is needed to ensure inclusivity within the political framework.
3. Increased numbers of women in politics will enhance the quality of governance.
4. International norms of democratic practice have affected domestic reform centered on gender.
5. The bill is both a symbol of and an important element in upholding the democracy of India.
6. Successful Implementations will require support from both institutional and social entities.

15. Suggestions and Recommendations

1. Political parties should provide more electoral opportunities for women.
2. More leadership development and political awareness initiatives for women should be created and expanded.
3. Newly elected women should receive capacity-building assistance.
4. Gender-sensitive reforms in politics should be encouraged.
5. Delay in the implementation of the bill should not occur.
6. Educational and social reform must be included along with political reservation.

16. Conclusion

The Women's Reservation Bill was introduced in 1996 but was consistently met with political opposition. After decades of debate, the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam passed in 2023.

The Women's Reservation Bill marks a significant milestone in the democratic history of India and is reflective of the increased awareness of the importance of having women participate equally in governance for democracy to be truly representative. The bill aims to create a more inclusive political system by reserving seats for women in legislative institutions, thus addressing long-standing structural inequalities. In terms of Political Science the legislation strengthens representation within democracy, constitutional equality, and participative governance. In terms of International Relations, the legislation aligns India with global democratic standards and commitments to gender equality.

While there are still many challenges regarding implementation, representation and autonomy of women in the political process, the passage of the Women's Reservation Bill has the capability to create transformational change in the political process in India. The true success of the legislation will depend not only on numerical representation but also on the substantive participation and leadership of women in decision-making processes.

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